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CONTRIBUTORS

Stephania Taladrid (*"The Life of the Mother," p. 26*), a contributing writer, was named a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2023 for her reporting on the fall of Roe v. Wade. Fabrice Robinet contributed additional research for this piece.

Jon Lee Anderson (*"The Long Way," p. 12*), a staff writer, began contributing to *The New Yorker* in 1998.

Joy Williams (*Fiction, p. 44*) has published ten books of fiction, including the story collection "The Visiting Privilege" and the novel "Harrow."

Michael Schulman (*The Talk of the Town, p. 8*) is a staff writer. His latest book, "Oscar Wars," came out last year.

Hannah Goldfield (*On and Off the Menu, p. 56*), a staff writer, covers food culture for the magazine.

Richard Siken (*Poem, p. 47*) is a poet, a painter, and a filmmaker. His books include "Crush," selected for the Yale Series of Younger Poets prize, and the forthcoming "I Do Know Some Things."

Julian Lucas (*"Shamelessly Dramatic," p. 34*) became a staff writer at the magazine in 2021.

Alec MacGillis (*"Showing Up," p. 20*), a reporter for ProPublica, most recently published "Fulfillment." This article is a collaboration between *The New Yorker* and ProPublica.

Catherine Barnett (*Poem, p. 38*) is the author of four collections of poems, including "Human Hours" and "Solutions for the Problem of Bodies in Space," due out this spring.

Daniel Immerwahr (*A Critic at Large, p. 50*) teaches history at Northwestern University and is the author of "How to Hide an Empire."

Alexandra Schwartz (*The Talk of the Town, p. 11*) joined the magazine in 2013 and became a staff writer in 2016.

Jennifer Homans (*Dancing, p. 58*), the magazine's dance critic, is the author of, most recently, "Mr. B: George Balanchine's 20th Century."

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

THE POLITICAL SCENE

Benjamin Wallace-Wells writes about the turn of Iowa's religious right toward Donald Trump.

PERSONS OF INTEREST

Katy Waldman on the autofictionist Kate Zambreno's pandemic-era shift from the inward to the communal.

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LEFT: JORDAN GALE; RIGHT: HEATHER STEN / EAST

THE MAIL

UNDERSTANDING CANCER

Siddhartha Mukherjee, in his piece on the root causes of cancer, describes a moment of revelation, when he came to understand that mutations that give rise to cancer lie latent until the "insult" of inflammation occurs ("Sleeper Cells," December 18th). He traces the development of that idea mostly through epidemiological studies. But it's also interesting to consider one beautiful experiment, by Salvador Luria and Max Delbrück, in 1943, that provided clean data supporting the idea of preëxisting mutations. Luria and Delbrück showed that, in bacteria, selective pressure does not induce mutations; rather, the pressure reveals the cells in which mutations already exist. (When a virus was introduced into a petri dish, it killed bacteria that lacked disease-resistant mutations, leaving behind organisms that, by chance, had these mutations. The virus merely "selected" for resistant bacteria.) Further, the experiment demonstrated the randomness of mutagenesis; the mutation rate fluctuated randomly. For their contributions to genetics, the authors shared a Nobel Prize. With the powerful DNA-sequencing methods available today, a similar experiment might be run on mammalian cells to reveal latent vulnerabilities.

Hugh Young Rienhoff, Jr., M.D.
San Carlos, Calif.

MORAL TRADITIONS

I agree with many of Masha Gessen's conclusions in their brilliant essay "In the Shadow of the Holocaust" (newyorker.com/gessen-on-gaza-and-the-holocaust). However, I think that the piece's discussion of the Biblical legend of Amalek—in which God issues a commandment for the Israelites to annihilate a warring tribe—might have overstated the legend's centrality in the Jewish religious tradition. The story of Amalek was the first Torah lesson that Gessen received, at the age of fourteen; today, Netanyahu cites it as justification for his assault on Gaza. But, in the context of the rest of the Bible, it is a minor episode, and one that has been interrogated by Biblical scholars as far back as Maimonides. It is a distortion of Biblical moral teachings for Netanyahu to rank the annihilation of another people as a major commandment, as if the Ten Commandments, the prophets' lessons about social justice, and the paradigm of the liberation from slavery in the story of Exodus, among other touchstones, were somehow secondary.

Aaron Manson
Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y.

A.I. IN HEALTH CARE

After reading Charles Duhigg's piece about Microsoft's bet on OpenAI, I remain pessimistic about the idea of a tech future run by Sam Altman, Kevin Scott, and their investors ("The Optimists," December 11th). In a pitch to Duhigg about the transformative possibilities of A.I., Scott criticizes the U.S. medical system, citing an incident in which his mother waited in an emergency room for seven hours, then left without being seen. "The right Copilot"—like a specialized version of ChatGPT—"could have diagnosed the whole thing, and written her a prescription within minutes," he told Duhigg. But the current health-care system fails patients precisely because the people who design it and run it are profit-driven businessmen like Scott, not clinicians. Given the extensive and ever-growing body of literature about the grim externalities of for-profit health care—and its push to get doctors to spend as little time as possible with patients—it is depressing to read about a tech executive glossing over the root causes of this dysfunction.

Avelina Bardwell, M.D.
Santa Fe, N.M.

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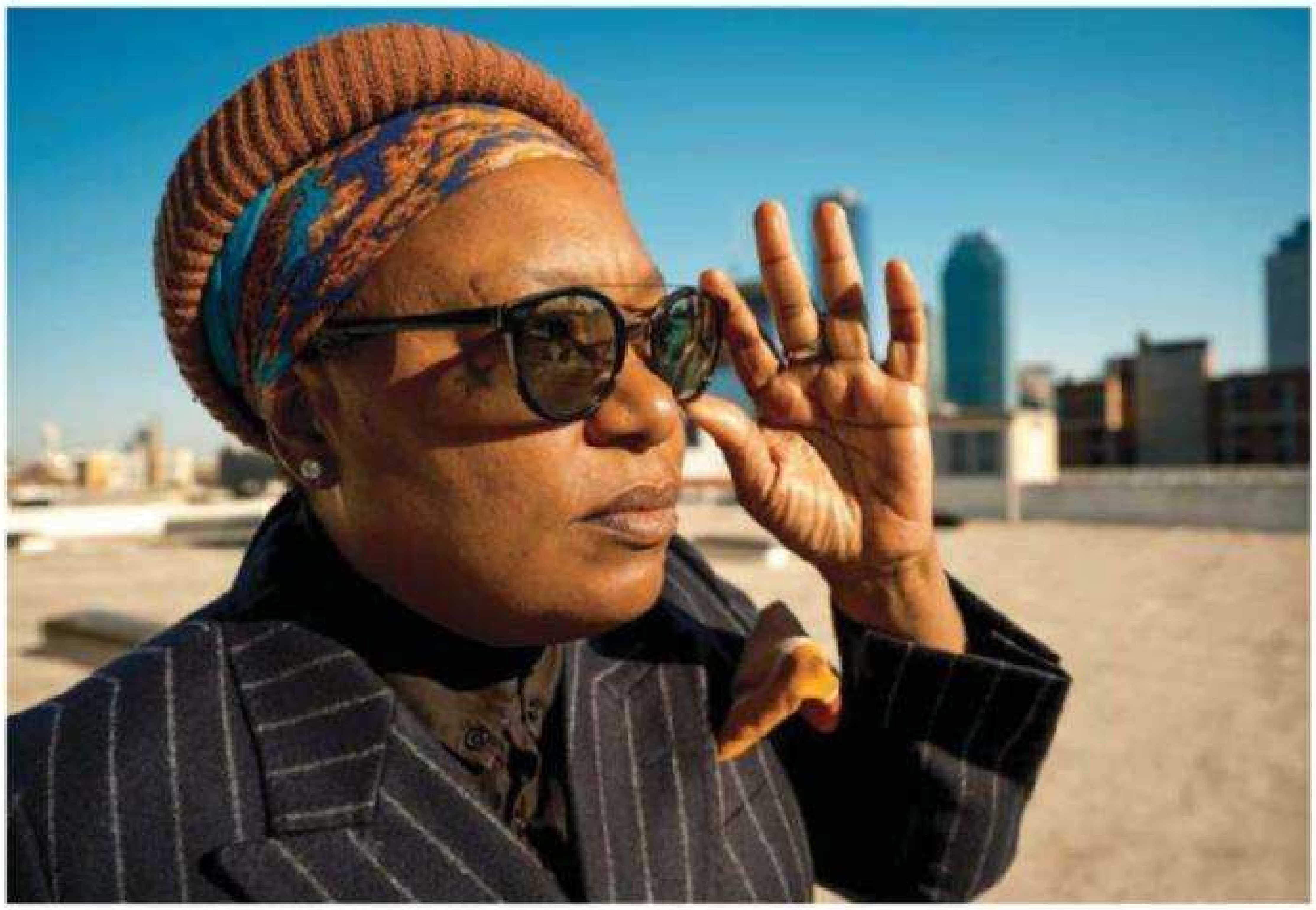
GOINGS ON

JANUARY 10 – 16, 2024

What we're watching, listening to, and doing this week.

Meshell Ndegeocello is the most significant bassist this country has produced since the advent of Charles Mingus and Flea. But, unlike those innovators, Ndegeocello, who performs an upcoming series of shows at the fabled jazz club Blue Note, doesn't really stick to one genre. Her incredibly musical ear and voice—she's a fine singer, too—takes from jazz, soul, pop, and opera (as in her tribute to James Baldwin) to make sounds that are resonant not only of the times but of her very deep and compassionate soul. Ndegeocello's latest album, the sensational "The Omnichord Real Book," is a testament to her continued belief that music, like life, only gets better when we make it together.—*Hilton Als (Blue Note; Jan. 9-14.)*



PHOTOGRAPH BY ARIELLE GRAY

ABOUT TOWN

ART | For three decades, An-My Lê has interrogated the representation of war through the preënactments and reënactments of armed conflict: staged battles, training exercises, film sets, and the myriad ways in which it is performed, rehearsed, or mythologized. The work on view in **"An-My Lê: Between Two Rivers"** charts how conflict embeds itself in both physical and psychological terrains. Even as Lê's photographs reduce hulking aircraft carriers to toylike size, her closeup portraits of rank-and-file soldiers and technicians evince an expansive empathy for her human subjects. In one image, as sailors set up a shooting range, their bodies map onto the contours of their targets' silhouettes a little too precisely. Lê's photographs function as an act of repair, uncovering subterranean histories in order to witness them anew.—*Dennis Zhou (MOMA; through March 16.)*

OFF BROADWAY | For someone who regularly plays bad guys—including a Tony-nominated turn as Hades in "Hadestown"—Patrick Page is damn likable. His gentlemanly charm and ravishing basso profundo serve him well in his solo show, **"All the Devils Are Here,"** in which he makes the case for Shakespeare as the inventor of the psychologically complex villain. This baseline appeal, together with Page's passion and feel for the material, on display in monologues or dialogues as Richard III, Iago, and others, keeps the audience on his side even when doubts occur. What about Medea? And why include Malvolio but not, say, Brutus or Cassius? Despite Simon Godwin's well-paced direction, which builds to a gasp-inducing speech from "Macbeth," this disquisition seems more suited to a lecture hall than the stage.—*Dan Stahl (DR2; through Feb. 25.)*

JAZZ | In 2021, a severe car accident left the alto saxophonist **Lakecia Benjamin** with a fractured collarbone, a fractured jaw, and a broken shoulder blade, prompting a need not just to reset but to be reborn. The album she was touring at the time, "Pursuance," from 2020, honored the legacies of Alice and John Coltrane with thoughtful reimaginings of their work; but in the wake of the accident Benjamin desired to more clearly commune with others in her compositions. "Phoenix," her first album since, is progressive spiritual jazz that revels in resurgence. The transcendental music—constructed around collaborations with the scholar Angela Davis, the jazz pianist Patrice Rushen, the poet Sonia Sanchez, the late saxophonist Wayne Shorter, and more—blends her formidable instincts as a star-in-waiting with her immense impulse to venerate other greats.—*Sheldon Pearce (Birdland; Jan. 14.)*

CLASSICAL MUSIC | Beth Morrison and Kristin Marting have lodged the multidisciplinary **Prototype Festival,** which they founded in 2013, in New York's classical scene, on the strength of their unflinching belief in the power of contemporary opera. This year's lineup explores religious and folk mythologies of womanhood ("Terce: A Practical Breviary" and "Malinxe") and the human effects of the war on terror and the death of capitalism ("Adoration" and "Chornobyldorf"). "The theme, if there is one," Marting says, is that of "an outsider trying to find their relationship to the forces of a society that is different from them." For Morrison, it's the prerogative of living composers to illuminate such issues with a musical language that listeners hear as their own: "We're telling the stories of our time in our vernacular."—*Oussama Zahr (Various venues; select dates Jan. 10-21.)*

DANCE | The curator of this year's **American Dance Platform,** Melanie George, starts with her own field of expertise—jazz dance—and expands from there. The first of three programs combines the Dormeshia Tap Collective, paying fiery tribute to under-recognized Black female hoofers, with the elegant jazz-vernacular meditations of Josette Wiggan and the second-line strutting of Michelle N. Gibson. Other programs feature Soles of Duende, a trio of aces in tap, flamenco, and kathak who share a gregarious spirit, and Dallas Black Dance Theatre, bringing new work by Chanel DaSilva and Norbert De La Cruz III.—*Brian Seibert (Joyce Theatre; Jan. 9-14.)*

MOVIES | In 1981, after seeing dance performances by Pina Bausch's Tanztheater, Chantal Akerman made a choreographic film of her own, **"Toute Une Nuit"** ("One Whole Night"), a modernist melodrama about the varieties of romance unfolding on a hot summer night, in several neighborhoods in her home town of Brussels. The movie (scantly released in the U.S. and screening in MOMA's program "To Save and Project," which runs Jan. 11-Feb. 4) is built from a crisscrossing series of encounters of lovers, whether longtimers reconnecting or new ones meeting, in cafés and corridors, in taxis, by phone. With a cast of seventy-five, Akerman films the roundelay of mad dashes and timid introductions, ardent embraces and tender dances, in the form of stylized gestures that—as in Bausch's work—are both banal and sublime.—*Richard Brody (MOMA; Jan. 23 and Feb. 4.)*

TABLES FOR TWO

Old John's Diner
148 W. 67th St.

If I were to scroll back through my life, tallying every diner meal, every fat ceramic mug of watery coffee, I think they might number in the thousands. My most recent diner cheeseburger was at Old John's, on the Upper West Side, which for seventy-odd years has been a spark of life in the strangely antiseptic micro-neighborhood around Lincoln Center. The restaurant closed, seemingly for good, in 2020, one of the city's thousands of pandemic-era small-business casualties, only to be taken over and reopened by a former employee, Louis Skibar, now a successful restaurateur who co-owns the Toloache Restaurant Group.

The new Old John's is very much like the old. The neon clock is still there, as is the black-and-white mosaic floor, but Skibar brightened up the place, swapping out dark wood veneer for white tiling and giving the restaurant's name a face-lift: formerly Old John's Luncheonette, it's now—less charmingly but, as it's open until 10 P.M., more honestly—Old John's Diner. Happily, relievingly, none of the changes make it feel at all modern: diners, as a category, are time machines, fuelled by memory of past decades and past selves.

The ideal of a diner—its promise, its function—is not to be great but to be there. At Old John's, part of Skibar's revamp has included upgrading the menu: eschewing the diner convention of calling things "homemade" even when they're fresh off the Sysco truck, cooks at the new Old John's make it all right there, from scratch. The chicken-noodle soup I ate was soul-warming, with curly egg noodles, hunks of carrot, and threads of white meat held in a rich golden broth; the lemon-meringue pie was impeccable, a buttery crumb crust and pucker-tart yellow curd under a snowcap of floaty meringue.

Diner food should not be excellent—it certainly should not include one of the best lemon-meringue pies I've ever had, nor satiny ice cream made in-house, nor tender meatloaf bearing zero traces of freezer burn, nor actually well-crafted cocktails. But the booths at Old John's are a mix of old-timers doddering, hustle bros conspiring, parents corralling kids, and solo diners nursing their fourth cup of coffee, exactly as a diner should be—though the coffee is rich and aromatic, and the experience not merely pleasingly tolerable but actively nice. Despite the excellence of the soup and the pie, the burger at Old John's is merely fine. This isn't a knock against the place; fine is exactly what a diner's burger ought to be. Old John's is one of the best diners I've been to, but it remains very much a diner, which is to say that it's a flawless restaurant if you're already in the neighborhood and need a place to eat. It's warm, it's open, it exists outside the flow of time, it's easy, it's right there. *(Dishes $8-$30.)*

—Helen Rosner

PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM WHYTE FOR THE NEW YORKER;
ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHRISTOPH NIEMANN (TOP); KRUTTIKA SUSARLA (BOTTOM)

PICK THREE

The staff writer Parul Sehgal shares three of her favorite novellas.

1. Lately, I've encountered too many lapsed readers. They bemoan how they used to read, and would read, but since the pandemic—or cue any contemporary horror—the active surrender that reading requires (especially fiction) feels too absorbing, too risky, when one must maintain a state of constant alert. Over the holidays, I gifted the lapsed readers in my life three novels—all short, recent (allowing my malingering readers to justify them as a kind of "news," which, of course, they are), and, most important, irresistible. The first, **"Ghachar Ghochar,"** by Vivek Shanbhag, translated from the Kannada into English by Srinath Perur, is the story of the breakdown of a marriage, and it is a perfect piece of literature—swift and harrowing, constructed out of the simplest language and the most inextricable moral tangles.

2. "Small Things Like These," by the Irish writer Claire Keegan, feels like a cousin to "Ghachar Ghochar," with its velocity and its plain, radiant prose. A coal merchant discovers a young woman imprisoned in a convent. As with Shanbhag's novel, we see an entire social order and a history made manifest—or rebuked—in a single moment, in a character's single choice.

3. Eva Baltasar's **"Boulder,"** translated from the Catalan by Julia Sanches, is the most recent of the three—a ragged, sensuous story. Read it last. After the two previous books that are very much about misogyny, here you will meet a gorgeously untethered woman wondering just what to do with her freedom. A book about new life for a new year.

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

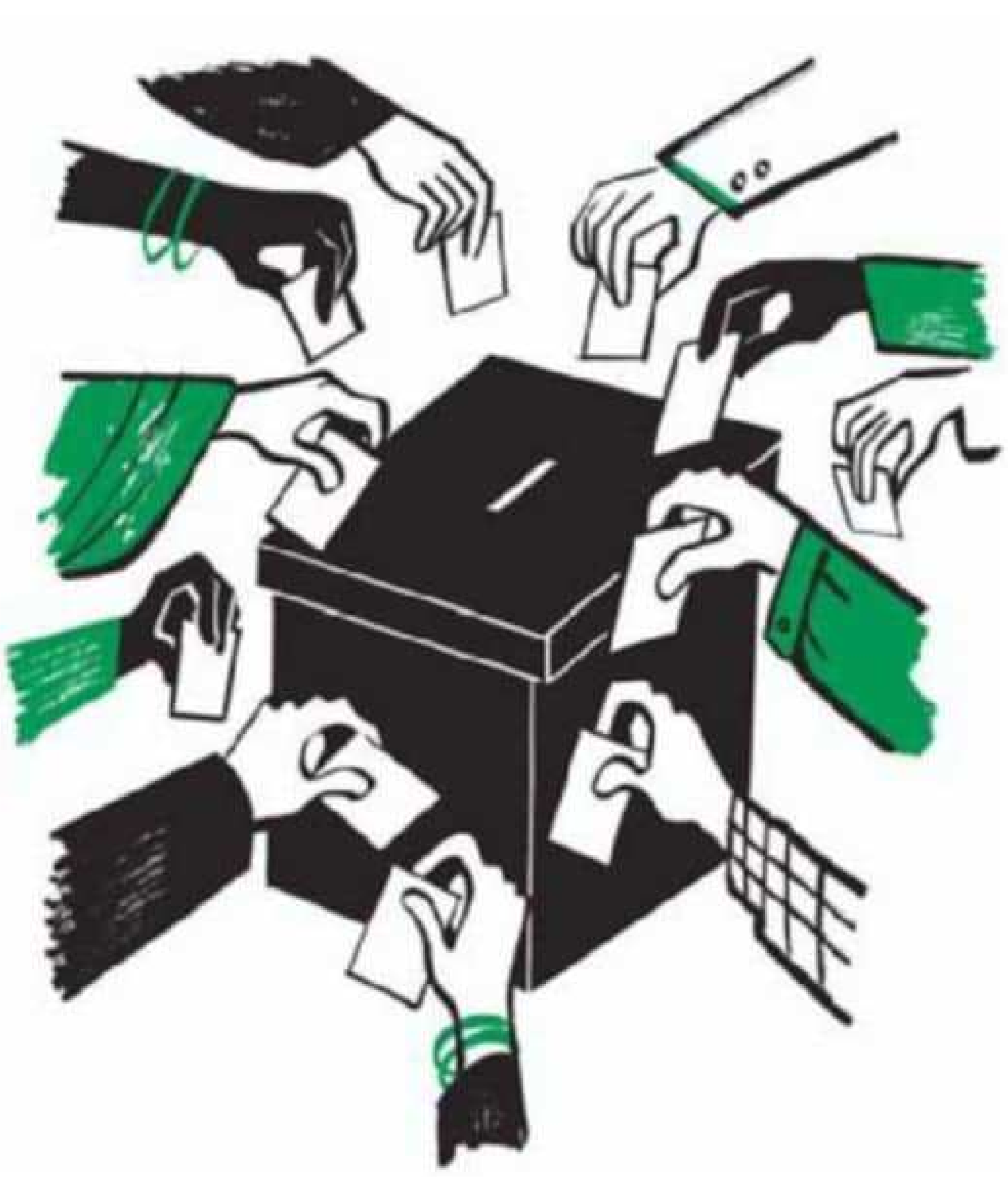
COMMENT

THE BIG VOTE

Democracy, according to many observers, is now in the hands of a small band of voters in a half-dozen swing states, whose feelings about Donald Trump will determine whether it endures or falls. From that perspective, all the other voting across the country this year, beginning with the Iowa caucuses, next week, is merely a gruelling prelude to the tense wait, on November 5th, for results from Maricopa County and the Philadelphia suburbs. Much does depend on those voters. But democracy's struggles will play out on a far vaster field. Thanks to an alignment of calendars, 2024 will set a record for the greatest number of people living in countries that are holding nationwide elections: more than four billion, or just over half of humanity. Even more depends on them.

This year is about voting, in all its hazardous glory. There are different ways of counting, but *The Economist* has tallied seventy-six countries where the whole eligible population has the chance to vote, even if, as in Brazil, it's only for local offices. (That election, in October, should serve as a midterm assessment of President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva.) The countries involved—from Algeria to Iceland, Indonesia, and Venezuela—are startlingly varied, including in their commitment to actual democracy. *The Economist* rated forty-three of the elections as free and fair, with flaws even in the freest, ours among them. One of *The Economist's* tests is whether an election has the capacity to bring about real change, in terms of policy and who is in power. Put another way, the stability of democracies depends on the capacity of elections to be destabilizing. An election that doesn't involve some risk, to someone, is hardly any good.

Those risks should be about outcomes and not, of course, about the dangers of voting or of running in the first place. Bangladesh got the election year started on January 7th, after a bitter campaign in which the opposition complained of politicized arrests and called for a boycott of the vote. But democracy is, in a number of respects, in an even more perilous state in Russia, where Vladimir Putin will almost certainly be re-anointed in an election in March; the man who might have been his most potent challenger, Alexei Navalny, is currently an inmate at a penal colony in Kharp, in Western Siberia. Still, the turnout of Russian voters, and the mood on the street, will reveal something about Putin's hold on power. (Iran, where elections are contested among a very limited spectrum of candidates, will face a parallel test that same month, following a year of mass protests.) Meanwhile, Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelensky, has said that he doesn't intend for an election scheduled for March to take place, because, given the war, it would be "absolutely irresponsible to throw the topic of elections into society in a lighthearted and playful way." That choice may be comprehensible. Yet it still feels like a loss, and possibly a tragedy.



The single largest election this year, spanning April and May, will be for India's Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament, whose five hundred and forty-three members represent 1.4 billion people. The sprawling campaign will determine whether Narendra Modi remains Prime Minister (it would be a shock if he didn't) and if his Bharatiya Janata Party will be forced to form a coalition (possible). This election will closely follow one in Pakistan, which has been shaped by the criminal conviction and imprisonment of the opposition leader, former Prime Minister Imran Khan. Pakistan may also offer a harbinger of the rise of artificial intelligence in elections: Khan, who has been blocked from making campaign and broadcast appearances, released a video with A.I.-generated audio of himself giving a speech.

The second-largest election will be for the parliament of a polity that is still, in many ways, being formed: the

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

European Union. That election will be held in June, across twenty-seven countries. Members of the European Parliament caucus not by country but by transnational meta-party—both France's Renaissance and Germany's Free Democrats are part of the Renew Europe group, for example. The election will help to set Europe's priorities, notably with regard to Ukraine. It will also be a barometer of the political moods of European nations, many of which are regarded as restless; right-wing populists won a surprise victory in the Netherlands last year. (In the United Kingdom, which left the E.U., Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has until January, 2025, to call new elections.)

In North America, Mexico will choose a successor to President Andrés Manuel López Obrador in June; the leading candidates are two women, Claudia Sheinbaum and Xochitl Gálvez. Not counting the E.U.'s joint poll, however, the continent with the most elections in 2024 is Africa—eighteen by *The Economist's* tally—though some have yet to be scheduled. One of the more closely watched will be in South Africa, where the African National Congress has a significant chance of losing power for the first time in thirty years, largely because voters view its leaders as corrupt. In South Sudan, where an election that was originally scheduled for 2015 is supposed to take place in December, the question is whether people will get to vote for anybody at all.

Meanwhile, an unusual number of Chinese observation balloons have been spotted over Taiwan, which is in the midst of a three-way race for a new President, to be decided on January 13th. In case anyone missed the message, one Chinese official said, according to Reuters, that people in what he called "the Taiwan region" ought to "make a correct choice," and suggested that the wrong choice could lead to war. Lai Ching-te, of Taiwan's governing Democratic Progressive Party, is seen as less conciliatory toward China than Hou You-ih, of the Kuomintang. The polls are very close.

The obvious question is: Of these dozens of elections, which is the most important? We might be inclined to say that ours is, because we are the United States, and because of all that Trump might do. But we don't know what crises and triumphs will result from elections elsewhere, or what going to the polls might mean for another nation's rise, even as we contemplate where our country is in the arc of its world significance. We don't know what the effect will be—demoralizing, unsettling, or inspiring—of month after month of election news. Most of all, in a good many places, we don't know who is going to win.

—*Amy Davidson Sorkin*

THE BOARDS
NOISE ON WHEELS

Times Square, on its best days, is a hive of controlled chaos, where tourists, cabbies, actors, Elmos, and the Naked Cowboy manage a tenuous coexistence. A new element can upset the ecosystem. Witness the proliferation of music-blaring pedicabs, which lately have turned from rare treat to swarm—some say scourge. "I've seen pedicabs in the city for over twenty years," Tom Harris, the president of the Times Square Alliance, said the other day. He was near the TKTS booth, amid the holiday throngs. "Recently, the behavior has pushed it to a point where it's not an amenity—it's a detraction from the quality of life."

Harris (trenchcoat, Brooklyn accent) has overseen a growing turf war between the bicycle-drawn carriages and the Broadway community. "They congregate around theatres at the end of theatre times. They almost block up the entire street. Their sound is blasting outside even before the show lets out," he said. "And there's predatory pricing. I've heard stories of people paying hundreds of dollars to go a few blocks." Only a small number of pedicabs are licensed, he explained. Two days earlier, in a sting operation, the N.Y.P.D. had seized seventy-seven illegal pedicabs in midtown.

Curbside skirmishes are common. Last spring, the proprietors of Glass House Tavern, on Forty-seventh Street, complained on Instagram about the horde of pedicabs causing "dangerous situations for pedestrians" and being "verbally abusive to our staff" as the drivers waited for the musical "Six" to let out next door. Glass House posted a sign warning tourists about the pedicabs' nine-dollar-per-minute rate; in apparent retaliation, the restaurant was besieged with negative reviews online.

Noise is a big issue. The police raid came two weeks after the city councilman Erik Bottcher sent a letter to three city agencies reporting an "uptick in complaints," in part because of amplified music that is "frequently audible during performances," he wrote. Broadway actors have messaged him on Instagram about it. He urged stronger enforcement of existing regulations and possibly new legislation. "If you're following the rules, I really don't have a problem," he said. "But they shouldn't be audible during a performance. That's just not cool!"

The pedicab playlists can be jarring. The Hayes Theatre, which recently housed the period farce "The Cottage," set in the Cotswolds in 1923, is across the street from "A Beautiful Noise: The Neil Diamond Musical," where pedicabs strategically blast "Sweet Caroline." "It's frustrating, because sometimes that noise will take the audience out of the moment," Jim Joseph, who operates the Hayes, said. Outside "Gutenberg! The Musical!," pedicabs played spooky music on Halloween so loudly that Andrew Rannells and Josh Gad improvised jokes about it onstage. Last summer, while the comedian Alex Edelman was performing "Just for Us," his solo show about Jewish identity, he could hear pedicabs' music from behind the stage wall. He recalled, "Sometimes I'd be in a quiet moment in the show and hear"—he broke into Alicia Keys—" '*In New York! Concrete jungle where dreams are made of!*' They were an omnipresent threat."

The problem is acute at "How to Dance in Ohio," a new musical, at the Belasco, with autistic cast members. "We have worked very hard to make the show accessible for audiences who have sensory issues, so having them come out to this blaring wall of pedicabs is really detrimental,” Fiona Rudin, a producer, said. One night, she recalled, an emotional scene, in which an autistic pet-store employee is berated by a supervisor, was disrupted by a pedicab booming “Single Ladies.”

Harris helped arrange barricades outside the Belasco, pushing the pedicabs across the street. “We tried to get them to turn down the music, and they just wouldn’t comply,” he said. A tinsel-bedecked pedicab stopped at a light on Seventh Avenue, playing a dance remix of “Jingle Bells” at a reasonable volume. Harris was pleased to see a badge around the driver’s neck. “You’re one of the few that are licensed,” he said.

“It’s not easy,” the driver, Mustafa, said. He’d come to New York from Turkey thirty years ago and drove a taxi before the pandemic, when he switched to a pedicab. “This is an immigrant job,” he said. But unlicensed drivers have hurt his business; he’d almost come to blows with one. “I have two kids. First time I ask New York State for SNAP help.”

Another pedicab sped by, blaring Will Smith’s “Men in Black.” “Here’s the difference—he’s got no license,” Harris observed. “This is like a tale of two cities.”

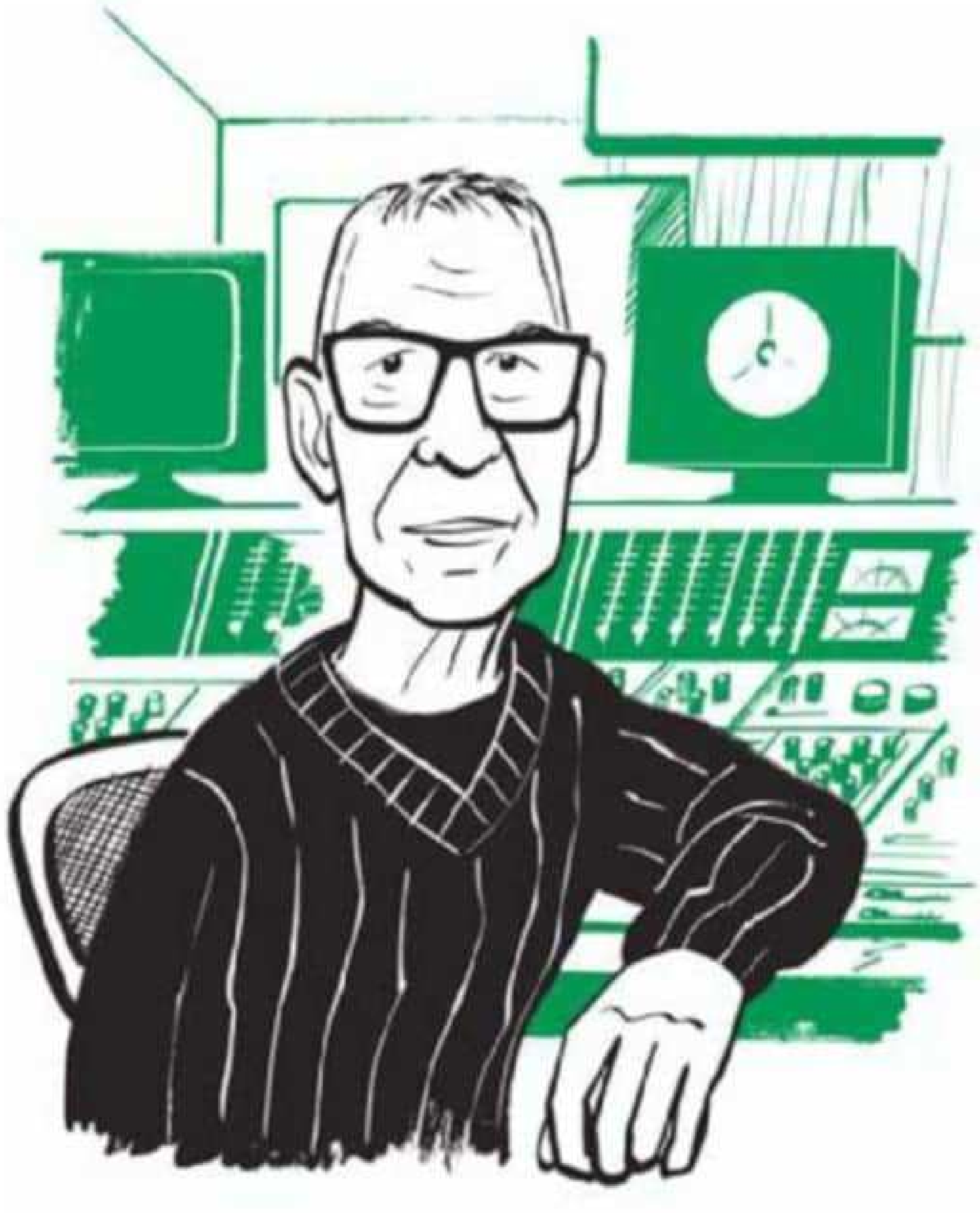
Mustafa said that he was getting out of the pedicab game; he’d already sold two of his three bikes. “I don’t like this job,” he said. “It’s too much hustle. Very bad environment.”

—*Michael Schulman*

DEPT. OF SONG

SKIN IN THE GAME

One afternoon last month, at a recording studio in Montclair, New Jersey, Tony Visconti, the record producer, sat in a control room turning a lyric sheet into a paper cone. He had an alto recorder in his lap. He inserted the cone’s narrow end into the tip of the instrument’s foot joint and blew a note. He was trying to illustrate a point about sound: to create a lower note than the recorder’s tone holes would normally allow, you could jerry-rig an extension. “It adds length,” he said. “That’s how you get the low E. They’ve been doing it for centuries.”



Tony Visconti

Visconti, who will turn eighty this spring, has been doing it—in this case, producing records—for six decades. He made his reputation with Marc Bolan and T. Rex, and with David Bowie (Visconti produced half of his studio albums, including his final one), but in the years since has ranged far and wide. By his count, he has made more than two thousand tracks. He was in Montclair to produce an album by Rogue Oliphant, a project led by Paul Muldoon, the poet. Muldoon had written lyrics and had convened the band to compose and perform the music. Rogue Oliphant is a convocation of aces: Warren Zanes, Chris Harford, Cait O’Riordan, David Mansfield, and Ray Kubian. Muldoon and the musicians—all but O’Riordan, who was in Ireland for the funeral of her old Pogues bandmate Shane McGowan—had shown up to add parts to a half-dozen songs.

Visconti, in all black, spun around to face the control panel. The paper cone, now on a coffee table, uncurled and became a lyric sheet again, for a song called “Skin in the Game.” He gave directions via intercom to Harford, who was in a remote booth laying down the lead vocal. Muldoon, in an easy chair, appraised his phrasings. A stanza kept tripping Harford up: “I used to like long hours in court/In which they tried to pin/A crime on somebody in thrall/To oxycontin or alcohol.” The last line was a mouthful. Muldoon gave Harford permission to try “oxy or alcohol” instead. Harford did. It scanned.

“*Brill*-iant,” Visconti said.

After Harford finished a take, Visconti cracked a smile and said, “I’d like to try a little experiment.” On one line—“I used to drink pink gin”—he suggested that Harford try speaking, rather than singing, the last two words. He demonstrated it, and Harford repeated it back. Pink gin, pink gin.

Muldoon said, “Chris, put it in your normal New Jersey accent.” (Harford grew up in Princeton.)

“I’m coaching him for Dylan, I’m so sorry,” Visconti said. “It’s kind of a silly thing. I don’t want to make a deal of it.”

Harford tried again. “Pink gin. Pink gin.”

Visconti: “Say it a little louder.”

“Pink gin.”

“Say it a little quieter.”

“Pink gin.”

“One more time and elongate it.”

“Pink gin.”

“I love it. I fucking love it!”

“The pink-gin brigade is going to be after us,” Muldoon said.

He went on, “The song is set somewhere in the vicinity of Cleveland.” (The musical setting suggested Memphis, especially once Mansfield improvised some Stax-y fills on guitar, Wurlitzer, and B-3.)

Harford sang a bit more, then said, “I don’t know if I got that note.”

“Come on,” Visconti said. “It’s only an A.” He played an A on his recorder.

They’d had four days in the studio to finish the tracks, rerecording parts and laying in new ones. This was the last day. The album’s working title was “Visible from Space,” which was also the name of the next song on the docket. Muldoon was here to opine, tweak, and savor, but not to boss. Visconti was in charge. Muldoon had asked his manager whether there was any chance of getting Visconti and now felt very fortunate to have him. “We wanted to see what Tony would do,” he said.

“The group gives me permission to alter,” Visconti said. “It’s my job to fix songs. Some producers are dictators. I’ve worked with producers who are utter arseholes. But I’m on the side of the band.”

On the table, next to the recorder, was a deluxe black CD boxed set, a retrospective released in the fall, titled

"Produced by Tony Visconti." It contains seventy-seven tracks by dozens of artists, famous and obscure. Visconti's introduction, in the liner notes, ends with a vow to keep making records for as long as his ears and brain allow: "Retirement is an unthinkable idea to me."

Zanes was in the booth, singing "Visible from Space," and Visconti spent a couple of minutes trying to get him to sing "the guy" as two words instead of eliding them into one. Zanes said, over the intercom, "What I've found is that, when you stop trying to please people, people aren't pleased."

—*Nick Paumgarten*

COFFEE NATION
TASTE TEST

Early on a recent Thursday morning, nine coffee experts gathered on the fortieth floor of the Edition Hotel in midtown. Their task was to drink—or sip at—twenty-seven cups from nine different countries. The first nine would be cold-brewed; the next nine, drip; the final nine, espresso. All the cups would be numbered, but the tasters would not know which countries the numbers represented. Their ratings would determine the winner of the eighth Ernesto Illy International Coffee Award. Each juror had been issued a curved, Illy-designed, low-scoop spoon, for precision sipping, and an iPad, for keeping score.

The evaluating nine were, per a press release, "multidisciplinary" and flown in from all over the world, and thus—fortuitously—jet-lagged. The initial vibe was Willy Wonka-esque. A life-style-magazine editor from Germany wasn't sure why she got the golden ticket: "I love coffee. Who doesn't?" Another tester had gone for a quick brushup at one of Illy's seventeen Università del Caffè branches. On the other hand, Sunalini Menon, of Coffeelab, in Bangalore, is world-renowned. She estimates her career intake at north of a million cups. The key to her success? "Sipping, slurping, and looking wise thereafter."

All eyes were on David Brussa, Illy's chief total-quality and sustainability officer. Brussa, a trim man in a navy suit with a tiny gold cup lapel pin, told the judges to trust their instincts and not overthink. Also, sugar could be found, in an emergency. Eighty-one cups of cold-brewed coffee arrived, spoons were raised, silence fell, and they were off.

Meanwhile, the company's illustrious chairman, Andrea Illy, had quietly snuck into a nook at the back of the suite where baristas were grinding and brewing. He was speed-sipping his way through the offerings, against the trademark gurgle of an espresso-maker. (His trademark—his grandfather invented the modern machine, in 1935.)

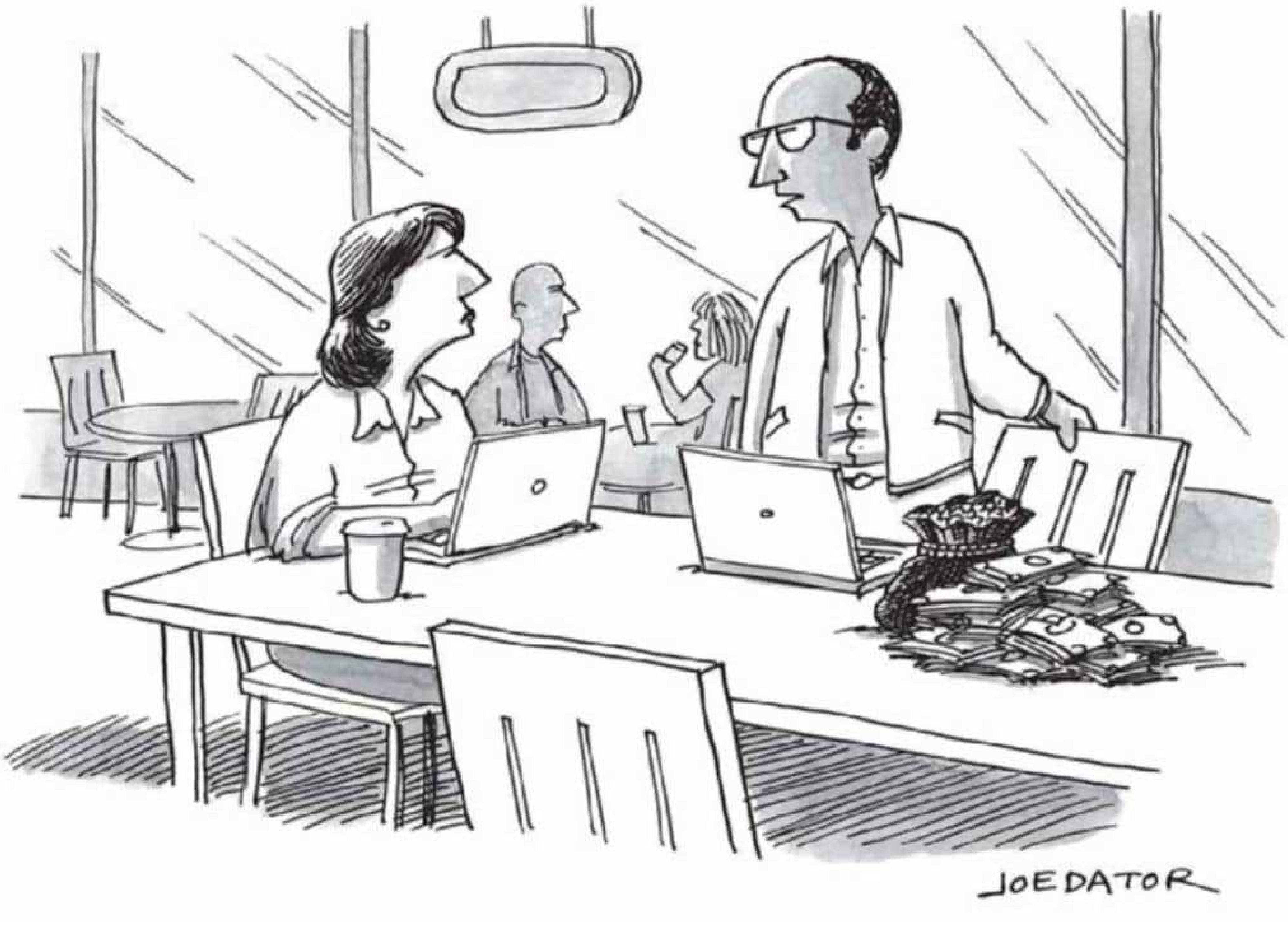
Illy wore an arabica-colored Zegna suit whose buttonhole held the same tiny gold cup as Brussa's. He said that he had woken that morning and flung off the false luxury of sleep with an American drip coffee. "Americans form a large part of our clientele," he explained in Italian. He leaned forward, his eyes narrowed, his nostrils flared. He held his tasting spoon as familiarly as if it had been his baby spoon, which it nearly was: he had his first taste of coffee at two and a half, from his *mamma*. When a particular cup piqued his curiosity, he would ask his barista for the key to the code.

"What's No. 2?"

"Rwanda."

His eyebrows raised slightly (meaning unknown). He explained the origin of the tournament. In the early nineties, the state of the coffee bean was abysmal. Coffee is a commodity business, and, without enlightened leadership, bean growing is a race to the bottom. To rally the suppliers, his father instituted a competition. The prize was not fiscal but inspirational—bragging rights, basically. Production quality turned around, and so did the industry—at least in Brazil. Moral extruded, it was time to sip again. Cup No. 7 raised an eyebrow, too—but before Illy could finish his set he was gone.

Back to the main stage for the last cup of the espresso round. Nine tired and wired cognoscenti. Menon's expertise was showing—she had arranged her first eight cups in a precise row. Finally, the last espresso arrived and was jointly degusted. The judges gathered for a photo, Brussa tabulated the results, and the winner was . . . wait! First, there was a trip across town, to a U.N. convocation on coffee sustainability, with such panelists as the economist Jeffrey Sachs. Illy spoke: "We all know that coffee makes us live better and longer. There are many studies. We don't have to prove anything." Next, twenty-seven grip-and-grins with the motivated growers. And the Golden Cup goes to . . . ? Not yet! Back to Fifth Avenue, for a gala at the New York Public Library. Illy women—Andrea's wife and daughter—dressed in



"Excuse me, I have to get up for a minute. Do you mind watching my laptop, bag of precious gems, and life savings in cash?"

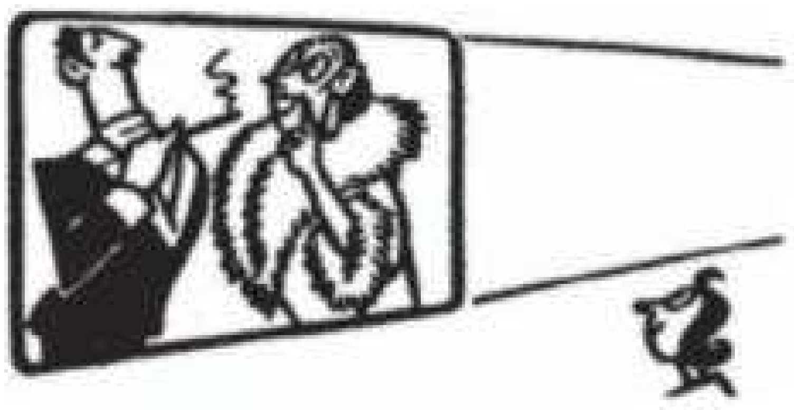
the company's signature red. Two hundred and thirty other attendees. Roughly as many filets mignons. Many speeches. Finally, No. 9—Brazil—wins!

After the U.N., the traffic, and the photo ops, Illy needed a boost. Cans of Diet Coke were piled on a table, but an Illy espresso in a paper cup was brought to him. "It is the quintessence," he said. He took in the aroma. "Dry fruits, chocolate notes. Take a little sip. Concentrate in the retronasal. This is the epiphany." He drank. America, he noted, was a work in progress: "Thirty years ago, you used to drink coffee as a fuel. Now you drink it as a delicious product—with milk." But how could the U.S. make the leap to Italian-level sophistication?

"Education. Education. Education," he said. And lots of espresso—but no milk.

—*D. T. Max*

THE PICTURES
RETROSPECTIVE



Lee Grant, the actor and director, generally leaves her apartment, on West End Avenue, once a week, to go to Pilates. In the fall, shortly before her ninety-eighth birthday, she made an exception to attend the New York Film Festival, where the first two films she directed were being shown in the revivals selection. Grant wore a red silky blouse, a black skirt, and a grommeted belt; her silver-streaked hair hung over her forehead in bangs. Her voice was strong and warm, with a hint of rasp. "From my heart to yours," she told the audience.

First up: "The Stronger," from 1976, a lightly Sapphic adaptation of a Strindberg one-act about two actresses in a love triangle. Next was "Tell Me a Riddle," about a Jewish immigrant couple who met as revolutionaries in Russia and find themselves at embittered odds in their old age.

Afterward, in a panel discussion led by the Turner Classic Movies host Alicia Malone, Grant talked about how her directing career came to be. "I was in a movie called 'Shampoo,'" Grant said. The audience cheered. "And Warren Beatty turned to me and said, 'Lee, you're *forty-nine*.'" Never mind that she went on to win the Best Supporting Actress Oscar for her role as a Republican housewife smitten with Beatty's horndog hairdresser. "He was saying, 'So long, baby! This is Hollywood!' And I was really fifty." The next day, she got a call from the American Film Institute. "They said, 'Do you know any actors who would like to take a directing workshop?' And I go, 'Me!'"

When the moment came, Grant felt underprepared. "I didn't know which end on the camera was up," she said. She turned to Fred Murphy, the cinematographer on "Tell Me a Riddle," who was sitting to her left. "So it was Fred who said—well, what did you say?"

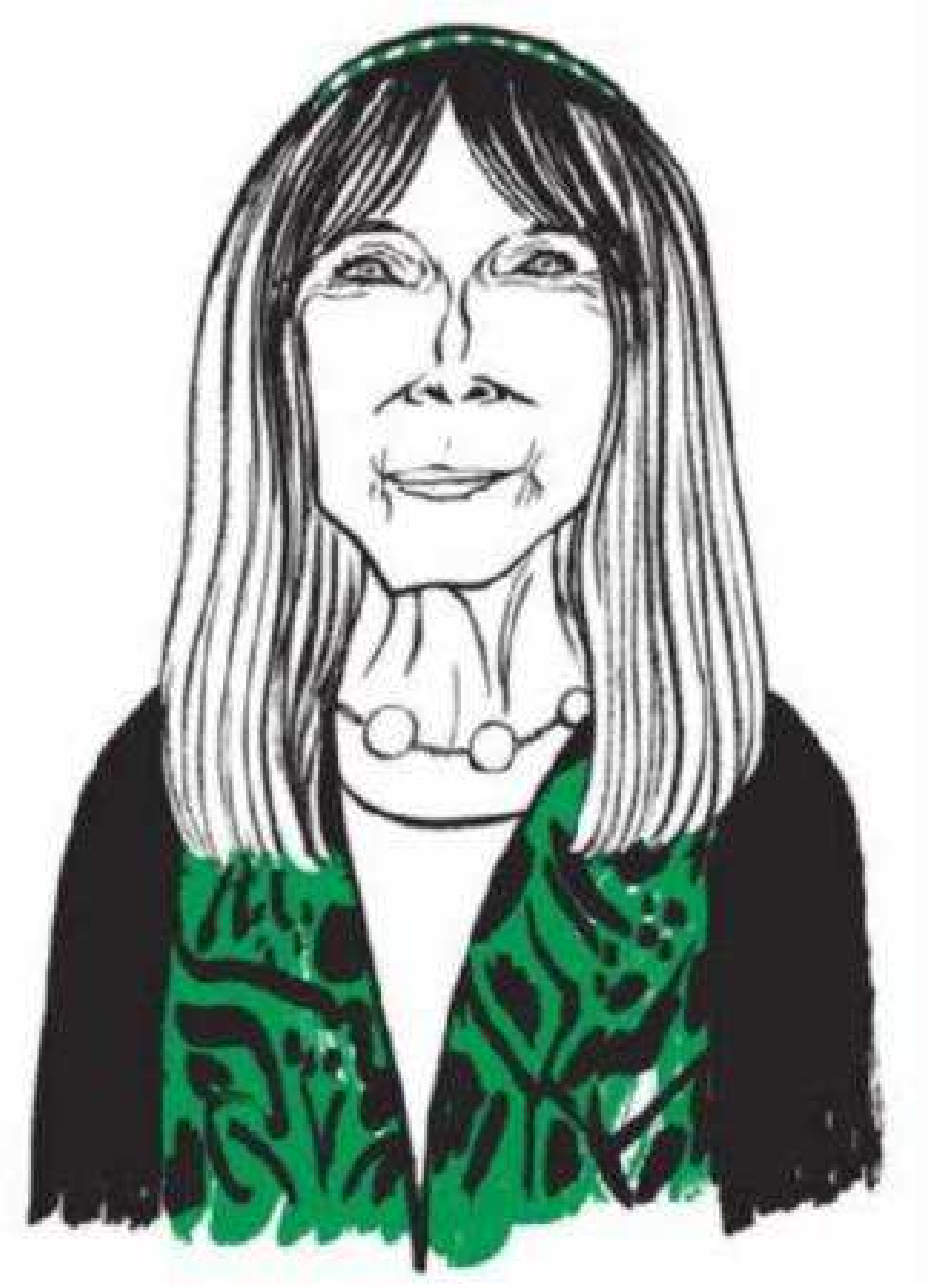
"I just told you it was simple trigonometry," Murphy said.

Grant decamped to Café Paradiso for a celebratory dinner. Brooke Adams, who appeared in "Tell Me a Riddle" as the vivacious granddaughter, and is now a grandmother herself, was there. So were Mary Beth Yarrow, Grant's friend and producer, and Joe Feury, Grant's husband, whom she met in the sixties while doing a musical. "She had on sailor's boots, a sailor's top," he said.

Over steak and ginger ale, Grant reminisced. She was born Lyova Haskell Rosenthal, and grew up on 148th Street and Riverside. "My father was the head of the Bronx Y," she said. "My mother and her sister, Fremo, came from Odessa, because they were killing the Jews."

In her memoir, "I Said Yes to Everything," Grant writes that her mother "was determined to plunge her hands into my baby fat and model me into a superior, beautiful being, who would either marry rich or rise above all others in the arts: ballet, theater." Grant went with option two. As a teen, she studied acting with Sanford Meisner at the Neighborhood Playhouse, and made her Broadway début, in 1949, as the Shoplifter in "Detective Story." When she reprised the role in William Wyler's 1951 film adaptation, she won a prize at Cannes and earned an Oscar nomination. "I was twenty-two," she said, laughing her throaty laugh. "I didn't know what the Oscars *were*."

The same year, she was asked to speak at a memorial service for a blacklisted actor whom she had worked with onstage: "J. Edward Bromberg, who was part of the Group Theatre," she said. "He was in a play that I was in that my husband"—her first, Arnold Manoff—"had written. My husband was a Communist, and I guess Bromberg was, too." Grant told the mourners that Bromberg had been terrified of appearing in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee; he had a bad heart and worried that the stress might kill him. "The next day, I was blacklisted," she said. "And for twelve years I didn't work."



Lee Grant

She was summoned by HUAC, too. "Macho, fat, skinny, old men asking me the *stupidest* questions," she recalled. She refused to name names. "They wanted to know if William Morris was a Communist. And I laughed!"

She was finally taken off the blacklist in 1964. "My first film job was 'In the Heat of the Night,'" she said. "Norman Jewison, Hal Ashby, they knew all about me. They called me in and said, 'Lee, this is your job if you want it. It's about a woman who lost her husband.' And I had lost mine." (Divorce, in her case, not murder.)

Dessert arrived. Yarrow got up to make a toast. "To our dear, remarkable Lee, my dearest, dearest friend," she said.

"What about me?" Feury said. Grant cracked up.

"Actually, right now, this is not about you," Yarrow told him.

Grant rose. "This is like a dream to me," she said.

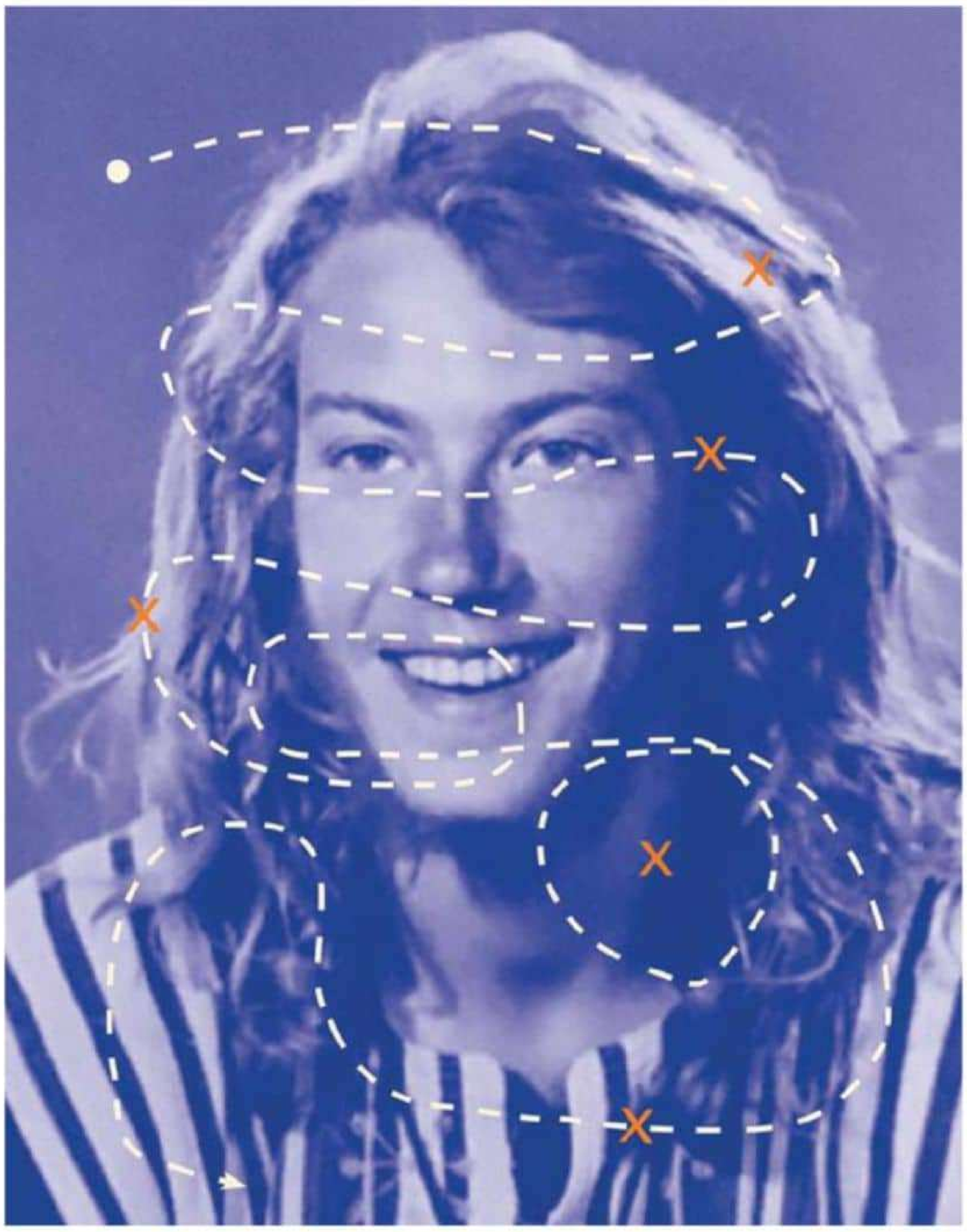
—*Alexandra Schwartz*

PERSONAL HISTORY

THE LONG WAY

Adventures of a teen-age world traveller.

BY JON LEE ANDERSON



The author at seventeen, when he hitchhiked through Europe, headed for Togo.

When I was twelve years old, in 1969, my family moved to Reston, Virginia. It was a planned community near Washington, D.C.—a suburban utopia where C.I.A. agents and Foreign Service officers like my father could raise their families. I hated Reston, and hated living in the United States. We had stayed in Northern Virginia for part of the previous year, between stints in Taiwan and Indonesia. During our time there, Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated—one of the few times I saw my parents cry. While I was out selling "I Have a Dream" stickers in King's memory to support the Poor People's Campaign, a neighbor sicced his dogs on me.

I ran away from home several times, and so my mother and father devised a solution for my restlessness: they sent me to stay for a year with an aunt and uncle in Liberia. I spent most of it ducking my chaperons to travel into the Liberian wilderness and around East Africa, and when the time was up I told my parents that I didn't want to leave. I noted that a Swiss adventurer had passed through Monrovia on his way to crossing the Sahara by camel and had invited me to join him. My parents pointed out that I hadn't yet finished middle school. Crestfallen, I went back home.

I got into more trouble as I entered high school, mostly for drugs; I did acid and pot, like everyone else, but a girl once shot me up with heroin before archery class. Several kids I knew died from overdoses. After that, my parents decided to move again, and began looking for a calmer place to live. My father took early retirement from his Foreign Service job—thinking, he often said later, that he needed to "save me." But he and my mother were also trying to save their marriage, which had become increasingly strained during twenty years of moving around the world.

My father had always been a wanderer, the kind of person who'd happily get from one place to another by taking a freighter. My mother—a children's author who'd published her first book at twenty-eight—had put her work aside to follow him. On Foreign Service assignments, the two had lived in Trinidad, Haiti, El Salvador, South Korea, and Colombia before landing in Taiwan and Indonesia. Along the way, they'd assembled a family. My sister Michelle was born in Haiti, where she got inoculations from the Embassy's recommended physician—François Duvalier, the future Papa Doc. Tina was adopted during the El Salvador years and Mei Shan in Taiwan. My younger brother, Scott, and I were born in California, between overseas postings.

My mother chose our next destination, the pretty Victorian town of Lyme Regis, on the English coast. Lyme Regis was famous for its cliffs and fossils, and for being the site of the nineteenth-century drama that unfolds in John Fowles's novel "The French Lieutenant's Woman." To me, it felt like a model-train set. Everything was tiny, from the cars to the terrace houses where people lived, and the English had pale bodies, gray teeth, and odd habits: even the children drank tea. To the locals, *we* were the exotics, a multiracial American family, and I was a boy who acknowledged no rules.

For my family, this period of stasis didn't last long. At the end of the school year, my father loaded my brother Scott into a VW van and set off overland for India. My mother secured a teaching position at the University of Florida in Gainesville, invited by the Southern-gothic novelist Harry Crews, and brought along my sisters Tina and Mei Shan. Michelle, who is four years older than I,

SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY THE AUTHOR

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN GALL

had already left home—first living on the Kenyan island of Lamu and then going to study in Nice.

By the time my parents left, I had been kicked out of school in Lyme Regis (wild and undisciplined, the headmaster said) and sent to finish preparing for my A-level exams in the nearby city of Exeter. I was enrolled in an academy and set up in a rooming house run by an elderly couple. My housemates were a doughy white Rhodesian and a tall boy from Hong Kong. We were all foreigners, and therefore misfits, and we soon fell in together.

On Friday evenings, if we were allowed out, we'd get fish-and-chips and go to the movies. Otherwise, we kept to a dull routine. The house had no central heat, and to stay warm at night we had to feed shilling coins into tiny heaters in our bedrooms. Our meals ran to fried eggs and ham, liver and mash, and beans on toast. After supper, we were allowed to watch an hour of "telly" in the living room, with our hosts in attendance. The landlady farted continuously. When I complained to the other boys about this habit, she ejected me for rudeness.

I found a room in a communal student house, and between classes I spent hours jotting down ideas for expeditions. On a piece of paper headed with my notes on Chaucer and "King Lear," I sketched an outline for a yearlong voyage, in which I'd buy a "small dhow" on the Persian Gulf and then sail to Madagascar and beyond. Next to a drawing of the dhow, I set out a goal for the expedition: "Smuggle and trade, be a freelance pirate ship." I determined that I'd deal in guns and rare animals but not in opium—reading about the Opium Wars had convinced me that it was an evil drug.

When my father returned from India, after nearly a year on the road, he asked me what I wanted to do with myself when I had finished my exams. I told him that I wanted to join my sister Michelle. She was spending the early summer with the Kabiye people of northern Togo, on an anthropological expedition, and I had thought of nothing else since she went. I idolized Michelle. She was beautiful, brave, adventurous; she had gone to Woodstock, and now she was in Africa—the happiest place of my childhood. In letters, she had encouraged me to come to her village. I had it planned: I could hitchhike south through Europe, then catch a boat. My father gave me two hundred dollars in traveller's checks and told me to make it last. A day or two later, he flew back to the U.S.

I found a companion for the trip: John Pirongs, a dark-haired kid, three years older than I, sturdy and even-tempered and good with his hands. On June 21st, the summer solstice, I said goodbye to my girlfriend, Erica, promising to send letters, and then John and I walked to the edge of town and hitched our first ride. By evening, we had made it to Stonehenge, where a group of long-haired Druids were celebrating the moon cycle by chanting and dancing among the great stones.

We stopped in Brussels to get Togolese visas before we continued south. Our destination was Marseille, where a passenger ferry crossed the Mediterranean to Algiers. I knew from obsessive reading of transportation timetables that we could catch a trans-Saharan bus from Algiers to Tamanrasset, an oasis town in the Ahaggar mountain range. There was unrest in parts of Africa, as Portugal's forces fought independence movements in its colonies. But most of the northern part of the continent seemed safe enough to me. We'd pass through the desert into Niger and Upper Volta, and eventually we'd arrive in Togo.

Anyone who passed me hitchhiking would have guessed my cultural leanings: I had long hair and a scraggly beard, and wore white bell-bottoms that I'd painted with orange mushrooms. I opposed the Vietnam War, despised President Nixon, and distrusted the police. My bibles were "Soul on Ice," "Steal This Book," and "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," and my soundtrack was David Bowie, King Crimson, Jimi Hendrix, Santana. I'd been in London for one of Pink Floyd's first performances of "The Dark Side of the Moon," and I'd gone to Amsterdam for an underground showing of the X-rated cartoon "Fritz the Cat."

At the same time, I nerdishly devoured the world atlas, any *ABC Shipping Guide* I could get hold of, and the writings of adventurers like Henry Morton Stanley, Richard Francis Burton, and Martin and Osa Johnson. I told people I met to call me Sâkúi, a name I'd been given in a jungle hamlet I visited during my time in Liberia. The name, I'd explain, meant "tall man" in the Kpelle language. (Back in Liberia decades later, I learned that it was actually from a phrase meaning "the boy who arrived by surprise.")

From Brussels, John and I thumbed rides through Luxembourg and Germany and on to Switzerland and France. Across the border from Geneva, we were left on a roadside at night, and a car pulled off to pick us up: a Citroën DS Shark, a gleaming gangstermobile with hydraulics that made it seem to levitate when you started the engine. The driver, a burly middle-aged man with a Russian accent, introduced himself as Parchovsky. He was headed elsewhere, but when he heard our plans he grandly declared that he would join our adventure as far as Marseille.

We arrived just as dawn was breaking over the harbor, and Parchovsky insisted that we toast our success. He parked next to the wharf and led us to a bar, a rough-edged after-hours place. The only other customers were a prostitute, with a russet stain in the crotch of her white pants, and a tough-looking man with a shaved head, apparently her pimp. Parchovsky ordered beers and raised a glass: "To Tamanrasset!" Then he gave me a Gitanes cigarette to smoke in his name on African soil.

With the sun bright in the sky, we lurched back to Parchovsky's car, congratulating one another on completing the first leg of the voyage. As we approached, we saw that the windows had been smashed and the trunk was gaping open. Our backpacks were gone; my camera had been taken, and our passports, too. As we looked around in shock, Parchovsky felt urgently under the dashboard. He had hidden some cash there, he explained, and now it was gone. Dazed by exhaustion and dismay, we drove through the empty streets searching for a police station. Little diamonds of shattered glass glistened on the dashboard, and the morning air blew in through the window frames.

At the gendarmes' base, a laconic officer took down the details of the robbery, seemingly oblivious of a large butcher knife that lay on his desk, dripping blood. Unable to contain my curiosity, I asked what it was. He explained that some Frenchmen had stabbed a Moroccan, and that he was waiting to hear whether the victim survived. If he didn't, the knife would be evidence in a homicide.

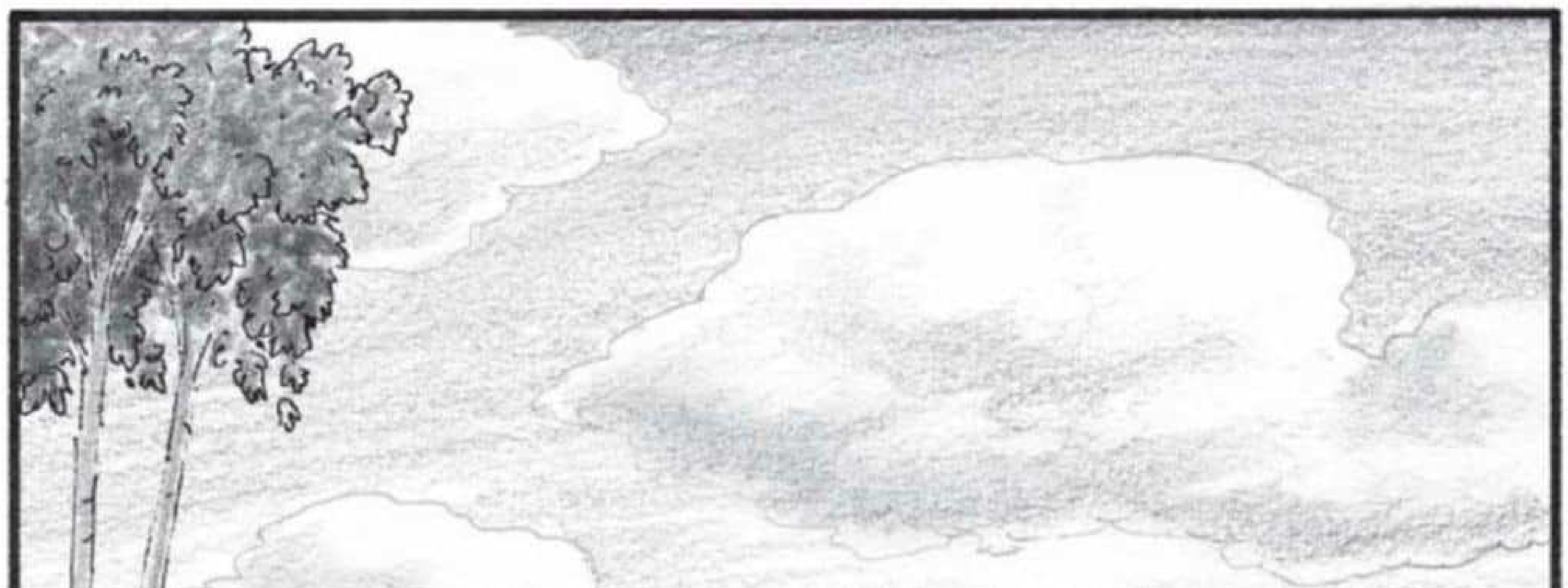
Afterward, Parchovsky went on his way, somewhat poorer but still ebullient. There was no hope of our taking the trans-Mediterranean ferry, not without passports, but the gendarmes told us to check in every few days to see if our belongings had reappeared.

A friend of a friend, Sylvie, had an apartment in the city, and she invited us to stay with her while we waited. Marseille had a reputation as a Mafia town and a heroin crossroads—"The French Connection" had come out a couple of years earlier—and it wasn't hard to pick a fight. One day, seated next to Sylvie in traffic, I yelled a phrase that she had taught me at a taxi-driver trying to outmaneuver us: "*C'est la guerre, cochon!*" ("This is war, pig!"). I managed to remove my elbow just before he brought an iron bar down on the open windowsill.

A few weeks later, we were notified that the police had found our belongings, in a watery ditch at the edge of town. Miraculously, they had retrieved our passports, waterlogged but still legible. Almost everything else was gone. We checked again on the ferry to Algiers, but there was a new obstacle: a heavy sirocco was blocking the Tamanrasset road. Too impatient to wait for it to clear, we decided to travel through Spain to Morocco, and somehow get to Togo from there.

I had been to Spain once before, when my parents allowed me to go travelling over the previous summer break. I'd been reading about the Spanish Civil War: Orwell, Hemingway, and especially William Herrick, a former International Brigades member, who wrote stirringly of idealistic volunteers marching into battle singing, "Life is just a bowl of cherries."

I knew that the idealists had lost—beaten by Francisco Franco, with the aid of Hitler and Mussolini. But I was horrified to see that, three and a half decades into his rule, virtually every place I visited in Spain had statues of Franco and avenues named in his honor. Hitchhiking in the Extremadura, I gathered the courage to ask a middle-aged Spaniard what he thought of Franco. Before risking an answer, he gave a furtive look over his shoulder. His gesture revealed more than his response: the Spanish had acceded to dictatorship out of fear.



"I'm at the shrub with the empty bag of pretzels we sniffed last week. Where are you?"

On this new journey, John and I headed for Cádiz, the port in southern Spain where Columbus had begun his second voyage. A weekly boat took passengers to the Canary Islands. According to my information, we could get another ship from there to Laayoune, a mining port in the colony of Spanish Sahara, just south of Morocco.

Arriving around nightfall, we found a place to sleep in the city park. To kill time, I proposed a challenge: I told John that I could jump from one side of a little bridge to the other. As I landed, I heard a sickening pop, and felt pain shoot up my left leg; there was no way of getting to a doctor, but I must have torn my Achilles tendon. John helped me hop away, then cut tree branches to make me a crutch. (I still have the crutch's arm braces, carved with "Tendon Blues" and "Marseille.")

The boat to Las Palmas boarded the next day, and, as we settled into our cabin, the door opened and we found that we had a companion: a young Moroccan named Baba, with curly hair, a wry face, and a street kid's spare build. For the next two days, he kept up a high-speed patter in broken English, like the dealer in a protracted game of three-card monte. Not far out of port, he informed us that he was carrying some hashish—a serious risk, because drug possession in Spain could get you a six-year prison term. Trying to keep pace with him, I got so stoned that I began to hallucinate and stumbled into the bathroom, where I saw my face in the mirror, revealed as a wizened death mask. I made myself a promise never to smoke hash again, and for a few years I kept it.

It was early morning when we docked in Las Palmas, and we had to wait for a control post run by the Guardia Civil to open before we could leave the port. The Guardia, when they showed up, were fearsome-looking figures, in paramilitary green uniforms, black leather boots, and the beaked black leather hats that their corps had worn since medieval times. They were hostile, and as I stood in line to have my passport checked one of them kicked my injured leg, cursing me as a *gilipollas* and a *maricón*.

Once our documents passed inspection, we were allowed through, but the Guardia had made it clear that we were not welcome in Las Palmas. We weren't worried. Surely, we thought, we'd be leaving for Africa within a few days.

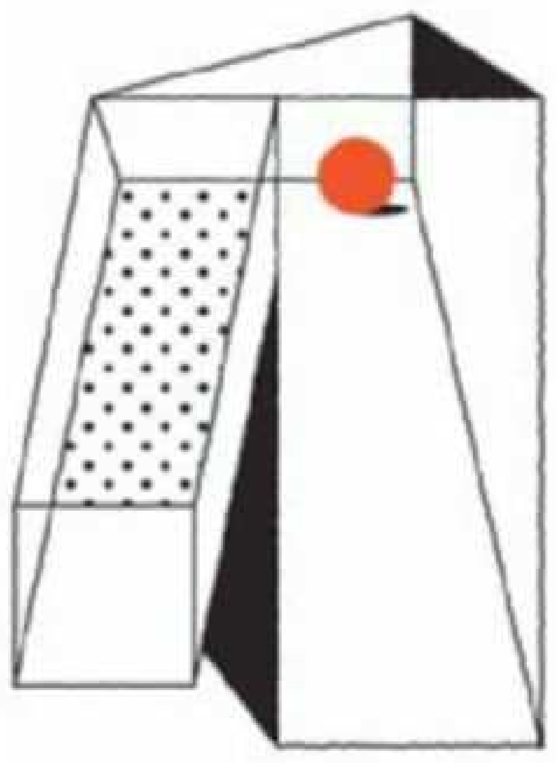
Geographically, the Canary Islands belong to Africa, not Europe, with the main island of Gran Canaria set only a hundred and fifty miles from Laayoune but nearly eight hundred from Spain. The chain includes eight rugged volcanic islands, with ideal soil for sugar and bananas. The *isleños* who didn't farm traditionally eked out a living by fishing the Atlantic.

King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella had seized the islands in the fifteenth century, not long after taking Andalusia back from the Moors. The Canaries provided easy access to the trade winds, and Columbus began using them as his final stop for provisions before voyages west. The islands had been populated for a millennium by the Guanches, Berber people of North African extraction. But, in 1495, as the Spanish secured control, the last Guanche king threw himself off a cliff.

Five hundred years later, the Canaries and the adjacent Saharan colony were practically all that remained of the Spanish Empire, which had been eroded by independence revolts and demolished by the Spanish-American War; in one summer of naval skirmishes, the despised Yankees stripped away the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. Spain's colonial Army was reduced to chasing Berber guerrillas around Morocco. It was in those obscure squabbles that Franco got his military start, in the twenties.

By 1936, he was the military commander of the Canary Islands—posted there by the left-leaning government in Madrid, which hoped to keep him at a safe distance from the capital. Instead, the islands served as a superb base for plotting. That July, Franco boarded a chartered plane from Las Palmas to Morocco, where he and his fascist co-conspirators mustered the so-called Army of Africa and began marching north. Three years and six hundred thousand deaths later, he prevailed.

By the mid-seventies, the Generalissimo was elderly and ill, but he clung to power, while the Spanish people existed in a state of suspended animation. Despite a veneer of modernity along the coasts, where hotels and apartment buildings rose to accommodate tourists, inland Spain was not much changed from the nineteenth century. With Franco's secret police and the Catholic Church conspiring to keep society in check, censorship prevailed, and laws forbade homosexuality, abortion, contraception, and divorce. During the evenings, I watched girls and boys my age walk out in the plazas to cast secretive glances at one another, but stern chaperons kept them apart.



Las Palmas sat on a peninsula, set off from the rest of the island by barren mountains. The whole city—a sun-blasted place of low, blunt, sand-colored buildings—pointed at the sea, with a military base on one side and a beach lined with tourist hotels on the other. When we arrived, we discovered that there was no passage to Laayoune. Morocco and Spain were in conflict over the fate of the colony, and the boat was reserved for soldiers. Africa was just across the water, but there was no clear way to get there. I had eighty dollars' worth of traveller's checks left.

Since we were waiting for a boat, we decided that there was no better place to camp than the port, and we found a deserted concrete yard alongside the wharves, where commercial fishing nets were laid to dry. In some areas, the nets were bunched in mounds, offering hiding spots. It was a refuge that shielded us from view but allowed us to keep watch on both the main port entrance and the closest city street.

The nets were like an islet that shipwrecked sailors swam to, and then, depending on their luck, were either rescued or figured out how to survive. Before long, a small group of us had coalesced there. There was Baba, the Moroccan who had come with us on the boat, and Najir, a friend of his. There was also a Ghanaian named Brando, who claimed to be a prince in exile. We never knew whose story was true, and mostly we didn't ask.

A Malaysian boy named Pili was on the nets when we arrived. He was thin, barely five feet tall, funny and engaging and bright; he had learned passable Spanish in just two months in Las Palmas. He told us that he was from a coastal village on the Malay Peninsula, where commercial fishing fleets came to force young men into servitude. After more than a year in virtual slavery, Pili had escaped in Las Palmas, when the ship's officers went into the city, leaving the crew for days without food.

Years later, human-rights investigations confirmed the kidnappings that Pili had described. But other visitors' stories were harder to verify. Hassan, a charming, sophisticated Lebanese man in his late twenties, turned up on the nets wearing a conspicuously expensive leather jacket. As we lay there one night, stargazing and trading stories, he told us that he was a cardsharp, trained by a man who lived in a citadel in the Lebanese mountains—a gambler so skilled that he had been banned from casinos around the world.

After a long apprenticeship, Hassan said, his mentor had pronounced him ready to go practice what he had learned. He'd headed to Monte Carlo, where on his first night he won fifty thousand dollars at poker. The next evening, when he returned to the casino, heavies ushered him into a back room and warned that if he didn't leave town they would cut off all his fingers. Now Hassan was stuck in Las Palmas like the rest of us, trying to figure out his next move. But he was cavalier: "Don't worry—one day soon, I'll be out of here and back on my feet."

Hassan stayed a few days before he vanished. Then, several weeks later, I was standing on the avenue in front of the port when someone called out from a car. It was Hassan, at the wheel of a

Mercedes, smiling and waving. I waved back. Then the traffic moved and he sped off. I never saw him again.

Las Palmas was an attractive place for international intriguers: wayward sailors, hippies carrying paperbacks by Paul Bowles, and mercenaries on R. and R. One of these fighters was a giant Finn with a red beard—too persistently drunk for me to find out where he was stationed, though I guessed it was Rhodesia, where the so-called Bush War was being fought between white settlers and Black nationalist guerrillas. Another, a Spaniard who called himself Fidel, joined us on the fishing nets for a few nights. He hinted at being involved in clandestine political maneuvers—perhaps with the Canaries' separatist movement, which a few years later planted a bomb at the local airport, leading to a devastating collision between two 747s.

Sleeping on the nets had risks. Dogs ran wild there, and one night a bitch in heat began following me, until a pack of males, evidently mistaking me for competition, backed me away from her, growling. There were thieves, too, and I once woke up to find that my backpack had been opened, its contents strewn around—though the thief must have quickly realized that I had nothing of value to take.

The most persistent threat was the Guardia Civil. At dawn one morning, we were awakened by the screech of a patrol wagon pulling up next to us. A half-dozen officers jumped out and began swinging nightsticks at everyone they could reach. But their real targets were the two Moroccans, Najir and Baba, whom they quickly surrounded, viciously beat, and then hurled into the patrol wagon—to be detained for a month on what we later discovered were charges of vagrancy. We began setting lookouts for the Guardia at night, but it was harder to avoid patrols in the street. Not long after Najir and Baba were arrested, Pili vanished, too. Several weeks later, I encountered him walking along a road. I called out, but he seemed to barely recognize me and was speaking gibberish. Afterward, I heard that the Guardia had beaten him so badly that he lost his mind.

During the day, we all went our separate ways. John and I usually headed for a fountain in a plaza, across from an ancient church, where travellers gathered. For young foreigners contending with Spain's repressive society and strict laws, the plaza served as a node in a bush telegraph—a place to exchange survival tips, warnings of risk, and rules of the road. Yet when John and I asked people we met there how we might get to Togo, no one knew anything. We discussed going back the way we had come, travelling the length of Spain to catch a boat in Marseille, but with our shrunken funds and me on a crutch it seemed implausible. Besides, we had come so far.

After a few days, a German traveller named Pavel, a strongly built kid with long blond hair, told us that he knew of a ship sailing in a couple of weeks to the former Spanish colony of Equatorial Guinea. From there, Togo was tantalizingly close—just a couple of countries away along the West African coast. Pavel was planning to go on the ship. Did we want to join him? We did.

We would need visas, and so he offered to mail our passports, along with his, to the Embassy of Equatorial Guinea in Madrid. There was a fee of twenty dollars; the process should take a week or so. John and I handed Pavel our passports and the cash. We felt buoyed. Just like that, we had discovered an exciting route to Togo.

Pavel had started out on the nets but found a way off: he was living with a Spanish widow, in a luxury apartment overlooking the main beach. We joked that he was basically a gigolo, and he laughed but didn't deny it. Once or twice, he showed up at the fountain with the woman who kept him off the streets—attractive, fortyish, clearly amused by his company.

The rest of us, with no means of support, spent our days by the fountain and our evenings at El Rayo, a cheap restaurant on a promenade not far from the port. It was a long, cavernous place with harried waiters, who hustled plates of food and barked out orders to the kitchen. The headwaiter was a stocky man with greased hair and a walleye, and he delighted in ignoring our table, because we were too poor to afford anything more than the cheapest plate on the menu: fried grouper, accompanied by all the bread and olive oil we could get.

The table next to us was often occupied by a group of trans women, who were resting up in Las Palmas between operations at the world's first gender-reassignment clinic, in Casablanca. (One of them, bearded and exuberant, liked to show off her breasts in a fishnet shirt.) At the neighboring tables, portside locals shared space with downbeat travellers from both sides of the Mediterranean. One evening, we sat next to a German man with a graying goatee—a foreman at a South African diamond mine, on vacation in the Canaries. In between calls for more liquor, he complained loudly about the African workers he supervised, calling them lazy and stupid. Finally, I lost patience and lunged at him, until my Ghanaian friend Brando pulled me off and dragged me from the restaurant. Outside, he explained that the stakes of getting in trouble were different for him: I might get roughed up by the Guardia, but he could be deported.

Weeks went by, and Pavel received no word on our visas, until eventually the ship to Equatorial Guinea set sail without us. Without thinking about it much, I stopped communicating with my family. It had become a point of pride to extricate myself from my situation, and in any case there was no way to reach them by phone; the only option was poste restante, a system by which travellers sent and received letters at post offices around the world. I'd mailed a card to a friend in Lyme Regis, telling him that I'd arrived in Las Palmas, but nothing more. As time went on, I entered my own bubble, living at the port and on the streets, with my head full of plans.

Hanging out at the fountain, I sometimes saw a tall, muscular Austrian with a shaved head and a forbidding manner. A friend who knew him told me that he had been born on a junk in Hong Kong and spent his entire life at sea. He was a former opium addict, a tormented soul, my friend said. He had lost his boat, somehow, and was frantic to get another one.

The Austrian used to lurk at the edge of the square with his wife, a Vietnamese woman with long black hair. One day, they vanished, and were missing for half a week before I heard news of them. In the grip of a malarial fever, he had stolen a rowboat, forced his wife aboard, and set out to row to Morocco. They were lucky to have been rescued by a passing

"Hold on . . . did you mean to hit Snooze or Jazz?"

ship before they reached the coast; Cape Juby, the point where he was headed, is a wall of hundred-foot cliffs, and the seas there had been known since antiquity to swallow up boats and their crews.

The Austrian had been reckless, but I couldn't help noticing that he had nearly made it to the coast. I began scouting ships on the Las Palmas wharves, where the better-off travellers docked. The one I coveted most was a turn-of-the-century schooner, with the name Marte in carved gold braiding across the stern. She was a hundred and ten feet long, with three towering masts and a hold big enough to fit a family of elephants. I visited her every day, walking on her decks and fantasizing about sailing her around the world.

Some of the boaties sensed my yearning, and one of them mentioned that he had a sailboat anchored on the neighboring island of Tenerife. If I wanted to go take possession, she was mine. I cashed in one of my dwindling supply of traveller's checks to pay for the ferry, then hitchhiked and walked across the island, and by early morning I had made it to the marina. I walked back and forth along the piers, looking for the number of the mooring the yachtsman had given me, but when I reached it there was an empty space. A marina employee finally explained. The sailboat had been sunk a few days before, he told me, pointing into the waters of the harbor. The suspicion was that she had been scuttled—something to do with insurance claims.

I returned to Las Palmas feeling distraught; all my plans had been thwarted. Increasingly desperate, I began to ponder joining the Spanish Foreign Legion. I had few illusions about what the Legion stood for, but I'd seen Legionnaires gathered at a garrison near the port, and I'd learned that a unit called the Nomad Troops patrolled the Spanish Sahara on camelback. If I joined up, I could become familiar with the desert, pick up some Arabic, and learn enough about camels to make my way alone into the Sahara. I'd enlist, spend six months or a year in the Nomad Troops, and then escape.

Even John, who had willingly come with me to the Canaries, thought that this plan was absurd. One day, he interrupted my reveries to tell me that he'd found a sailboat. It needed work, but we could buy it for the sixty dollars I had remaining in traveller's checks, and then figure out how to repair it.

I went to see her on a small beach not far from the port, where she sat in drydock, cradled on a metal platform with a ladder. She was a traditional Canaries racer, a lateen-sailed, deep-keeled boat about twenty feet long. The keel was rotten and needed to be completely rebuilt; what sat on the platform was really just a hull with a mast. Even so, it gave material shape to the possibility of escape.

I suggested that we call her Guanarteme II—the name, I'd been told, of the last Guanche king, who had leaped to his death rather than submit to the Spaniards. (I learned later that Guanarteme was actually an infamous traitor, who had sold his people out to the occupiers.) We scrounged for wood and tools and built ourselves crude bunks in the hull. When they were ready, we moved off the fishing nets and began sleeping on the boat. The beach was a grubby rectangle of sand, set beneath an elevated highway and a row of street lamps that shone down on us at night. But, on our platform, we were mostly invisible to people on the ground. It was as if we were already at sea.

To fix the keel, we'd need to replace planks, caulk the gaps with twine and silicone paste, then sand and waterproof the whole surface and coat it in paint. We were sure we could do it, with help from local sailors and boatbuilders. Not far from the water's edge stood a *chiringuito*, a rustic beach bar. Soon after we arrived, I poked my head in to meet the patrons. A grizzled man sized up my blond hair and growled, "*Fuera, sueco*"—"Beat it, Swede."

Later, the bar's owner came by to apologize. He was a bruiser named Pedro—a former weight-lifting champion who kept a gold medal around his neck to prove it. He wore little bikini briefs and no shirt, exposing a huge chest and belly and an array of crude tattoos, including one dedicated to his mother. Pedro lived in a large tent pitched in the sand, and he invited us there for dinner: stew that he had cooked in a fire pit outside. After that, whenever he emerged from his tent, he'd wave and call us over. We'd wave back, but we were leery of his stews, and of the rough men who went to drink at his bar.

Each morning, John and I split up, hoping to find work that would pay for food and materials. In my search, I heard about an English-language academy, the Instituto Inglés, which might need a teaching assistant. It was an hour's walk away, on the outskirts of Las Palmas, but by now I was off my crutch—and there was the prospect of a job.

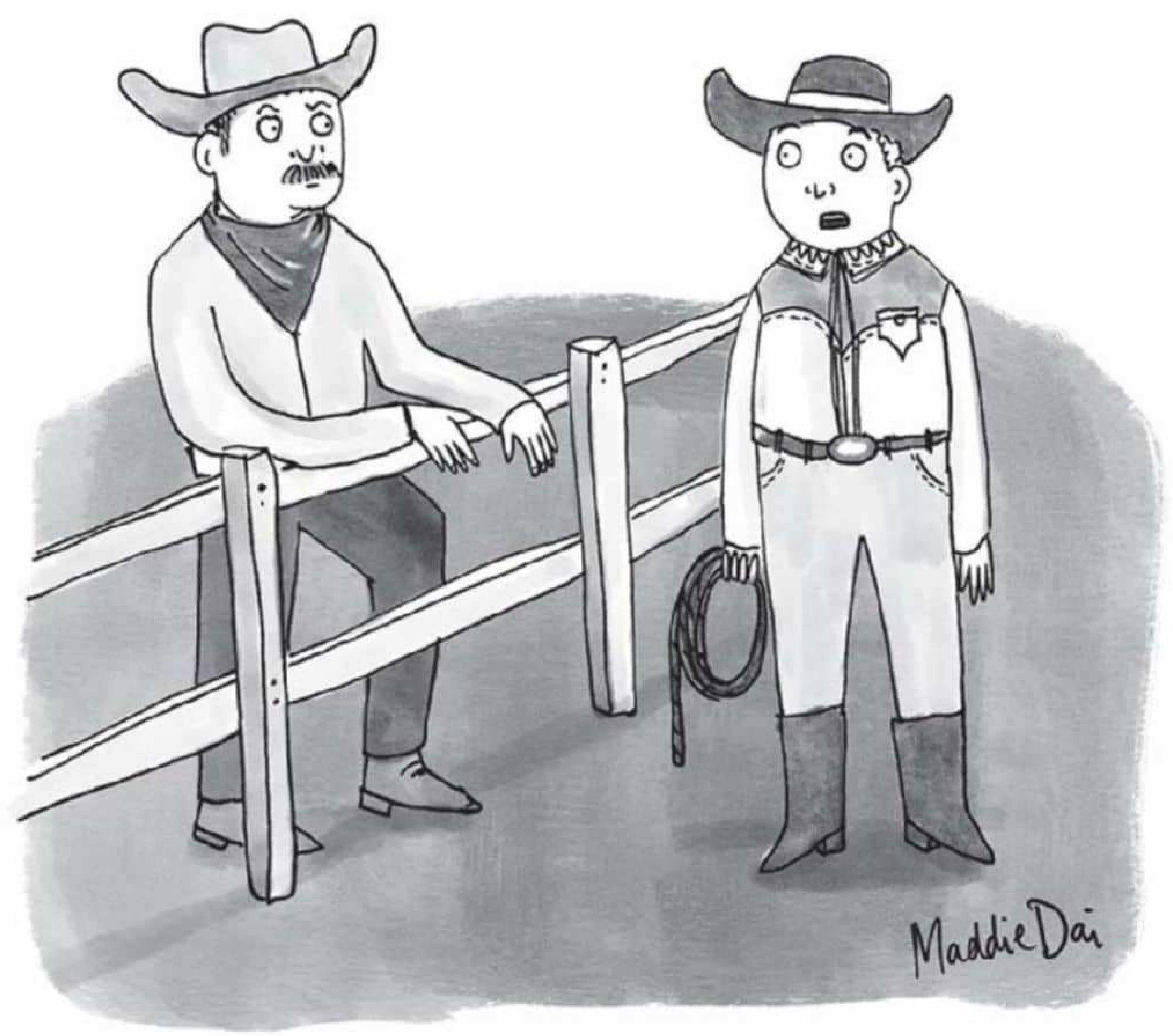
The director of the Instituto turned out to be a bombastic character with wild, frizzy hair and an Astrakhan cap, whom everyone called Profesor Reina. As soon as we met, he began boasting of the languages he spoke—Chinese, Russian, a dozen others—and recounting a meeting he'd once had with Winston Churchill. He had travelled all over the world, he said, and now he was home, teaching English to young *canarios*. His method was to deploy songs from "The Sound of Music." I sat in on a class, listening to him sing "Do-Re-Mi" and the students dutifully sing it back to him.

Most Spaniards, outside of tourist enclaves, were rarely exposed to English—there were no subtitled movies in Franco's Spain. Reina told me that I could come back in the morning and help the students practice their pronunciation. Famished and far from my part of town, I decided to spend the night nearby, to make sure I arrived on time. I had noticed a pile of concrete pipes next to the coastal road, part of an infrastructure project; I made my way there, crawled into one of the pipes, and slept.

I worked for Reina the entire next day, and at the end he invited me to eat with him—my first food in days. He bustled around his little kitchen and then set out dinner: two cups of camomile tea and a single bowl of soup, with two spoons. As we ate, he informed me that the soup was my pay. After another hungry night in a concrete pipe, I left in the morning, furious and increasingly worried about how we would earn enough to fix our ship.

I heard about a village down the coast—the last place in Spain where fishermen went to sea in open boats to harpoon tuna. John and I spent most of a day hitchhiking there, arrived at nightfall on the village's outskirts, and slept among the stalks at a sugar plantation. In the morning, we walked into the village to ask if there were jobs on the boats. It was the wrong season, we were told; the tuna wouldn't be running for six months.

Back on the wharves, I went hungry much of the time. Like other castaways, John often panhandled in the city. I sometimes did, too, but it felt humiliating to accost local people: "*Tienes un duro para comer*?"



"It's my second rodeo and everyone is acting like I should be some kind of expert."

Every few days, a matronly Spanish woman appeared at the fountain to give me a plastic bag with bananas and bread, and sometimes little packets of butter and jam. It was a kind of ritual: she handed me the bag in silence, and I thanked her as she walked away. Sometimes, as I shared the food with other regulars at the fountain, they asked why she only ever came to me. I didn't know why—my Spanish was rudimentary in those days, and her English nonexistent—but I considered her a kind of guardian angel. Once, she motioned for me to follow her, and we walked through the streets to a small house. Inside, a tiny elderly woman was waiting: the Banana Lady's mother. They pointed to a shower room and some fresh clothes laid out nearby. It was my first shower in months; until then, to clean myself, I had gone into the sea.

There seemed to be no work for me in Las Palmas, so I inquired about jobs on fishing trawlers. At one grubby vessel, a Sicilian trawler, crewmen invited me into their mess and gave me a meal. They told me they would be putting out to sea soon for a two-month stint of fishing. Did I want to join them?

I came away hopeful, if a little perplexed about why they were so eager to hire me. But when I consulted Brando about my offer he was vehement. "Don't do it," he said, explaining that the Sicilians wanted me as a "cabin boy," to have sex with. The same thing had happened to him on the ship he had taken out of Ghana, and he'd been forced to defend himself with a knife. That was the reason he had jumped ship in Las Palmas, he said. I was bitterly disappointed, but I knew he was telling the truth.

Najir and Baba offered a last-ditch alternative. Since getting out of jail, they had moved around Las Palmas, eluding the Guardia and finding ways to survive. Najir sold porn films, which were illegal in Spain and, he confided, a lucrative hustle. Other times, they picked pockets in the streets—usually targeting unwary tourists, who could be counted on to be carrying cash. They offered to show me their techniques, which turned out to be rudimentary but effective: you sidle up alongside your mark, dip your hand in his pocket, and run. The key, they said, was to keep your nerve at the crucial moment.

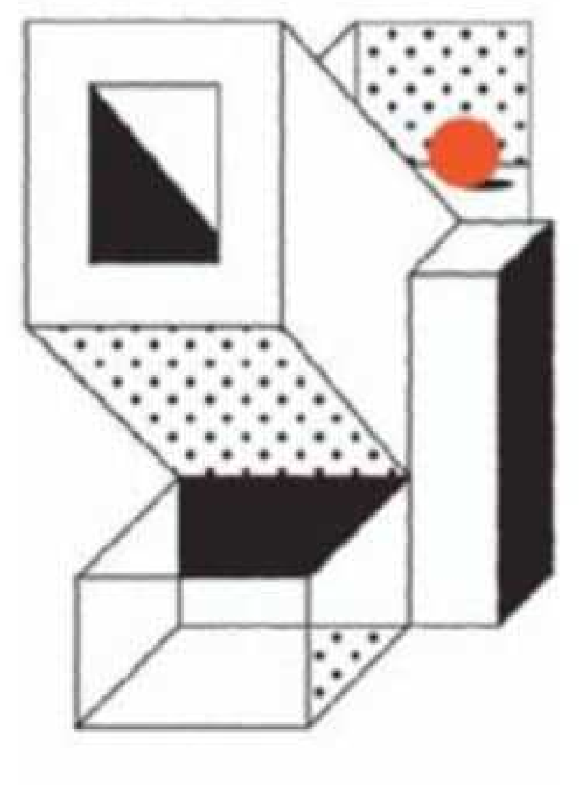
One day at the fountain, a drunk middle-aged man came up and leeringly propositioned me, pulling a wad of pesetas from his jacket pocket and waving it in the air. I told him to get lost, but I couldn't help noticing the amount of money he'd flashed—enough to fix Guanarteme II and get off the island. Najir and Baba, hovering nearby, had noticed the exchange. As the man stumbled off, they drew my attention with a furtive signal—pulling down an eyelid with a finger—and motioned me over. This, they said, could be my first test as a pickpocket.

Like a pack of scrawny jackals, we followed the drunk man onto a nearby shopping street. For several blocks, Najir and Baba guided me by sign language, encouraging me to get just behind him, matching his pace. When I was alongside, I could see where he kept his cash: in a right-hand blazer pocket that hung open as he walked. All I had to do was take the money and flee. Trailing on either side, Najir and Baba silently urged me on—but just then I hesitated, feeling sure that everyone on the street could see me. In a moment, the drunk man had moved out of range.

Najir and Baba gestured to me to fall back. We'd have a second chance, they said—I just had to keep my cool. We tracked the man through the streets, until he stopped near a group of teenagers lounging in front of a building. As we watched from a block away, he again pulled cash from his pocket. In an instant, one of the boys grabbed the money, and the whole group bolted down a side street. We chased them, yelling that they had stolen our mark and needed to share the take—but they were too fast for us. In a few blocks, the boys, and the money, had disappeared.

By late October, it had been four months since I left England, and nothing had worked out. Sores had opened on my fingers and in the corners of my mouth. One day, Pavel found me and John and handed us our missing passports. They had returned from the Embassy of Equatorial Guinea, with no stamps and no explanation. We were back where we had started.

John began looking for a way to get home. One of the wanderers in Las Palmas, a girl named Maya, had gone to the British consulate and asked to be repatriated; the Foreign Office had agreed to loan her the cost of return passage. When John told me that he wanted to follow her example, I said that I understood, and went with him to the consulate, on an upper floor of a commercial building. I was barefoot and dirty, but the diplomats welcomed us kindly. After the consul learned that I was an American citizen, he suggested that the U.S. consulate might be able to do something for me.



Until that moment, it had never occurred to me to seek help from the U.S. government. As details had poured out about the Watergate scandal, and about the conduct of the war in Vietnam, I had felt ashamed to carry an American passport. But the diplomats reassured me, saying that there was no obligation if I stopped in.

When I walked into the U.S. consulate and identified myself, the consul made an astonished noise and asked me to sit down. He opened a cabinet and pulled out a file with my name on it. I felt a terrible jolt as I leafed through it. Inside were dozens of telegrams and letters that my parents had sent to consulates and embassies across the region, asking if they knew anything of my whereabouts. They were accompanied by official responses in which diplomats told my parents that they had checked with this prison or that hospital and found no trace of me.

The consul looked at me scoldingly, but he was gracious enough not to say anything. I felt mortified by the evidence of the anxiety I'd put my parents through. I was in a state of shock, unsure what to think or do, but I told the consul that I would come back soon.

The next day, I accompanied John to the British consulate again. I was chatting with him and the consul when I saw someone come up the stairs—a familiar figure, but confoundingly out of place. It was my sister Michelle. We both shouted with delight and embraced each other. How on earth had she found me? Michelle explained that, after her Togo expedition ended, she had spent a few months in Ghana, living at the Accra Y.W.C.A. She had a vague idea that I would be making my way to Africa, but she wasn't too worried until a letter arrived from our father: there had been no word from me for months. Would she go track me down?

She'd come to Las Palmas intending to spend a few days, maybe a week, scouting around. She'd sat all day in a café in the main plaza, watching out for me, but there were hundreds of people passing through, and she'd ended the night with no leads. The British consulate was the next place she tried. It seemed almost too easy, she told me—as if we'd had an appointment to meet in this specific place.

Everything happened fast after that. Michelle booked me into the small hotel where she was staying and bought me some clothes. A few days later, I flew to New York, and on to Florida. Within three days of leaving Guanarteme II, I was at my mother's new home in Gainesville. Tina and Mei Shan were there with her, and so was Scott, back from his road trip with our father. Michelle would arrive soon, after a stop in France. We were together again, but it was clear that things wouldn't be the same as before. My parents had separated, and would soon be divorced. My father was living two hours away on the Florida coast, with an American woman he had met in Nepal.

For several uneasy weeks, I didn't know what to do with myself. I got a haircut, and my father took me to a doctor, who ran some tests. He informed me that I had amoebas and worms, along with an ailment that he had only read about before: scurvy. "You mean like Christopher Columbus's sailors?" I asked. He nodded. I felt very proud.

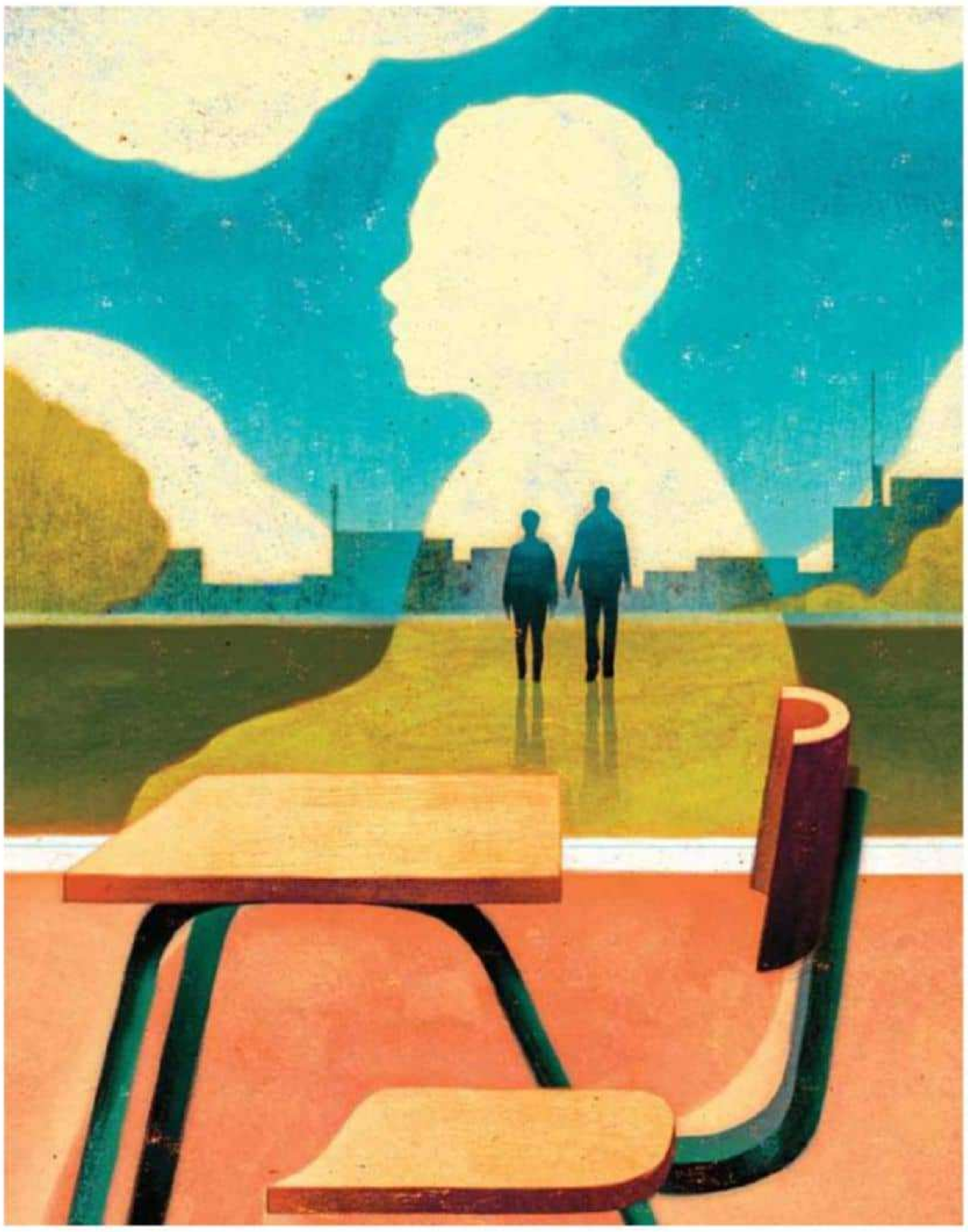
By early December, I was on the road again, with a man I knew as Uncle Don—a family friend from when we lived in Colombia. He had bought some oceanfront land in Honduras, in a remote stretch of jungle near a village called Sambo Creek, and he'd asked if I would come help him build a house there. Everyone agreed that it was the perfect solution for me. I was happy to go. ♦

ANNALS OF EDUCATION

SHOWING UP

Has school attendance become optional?

BY ALEC MACGILLIS



On a cold, clear weekday morning in early December, Shepria Johnson pulled up to a small house in Ecorse, Michigan, in an S.U.V. with a decal on the driver's door which read "Student Wholeness Team." She looked at an app on her phone. It was her third of ten visits that morning, and she was there to check on a girl and a boy, eleven and nine, who had missed enough days of school to put them on a list of "chronically absent" students at Grandport Academy, in Ecorse, an industrial suburb of Detroit.

In case there was no one home, Johnson wrote the students' names on a form letter and addressed the envelope to "the parent of Jisaiah and King." She wrote "parent," avoiding the plural as she had seen schools do. "If it's a one-parent household, that might get touchy."

There was someone home. Kuanticka Prude opened the door; behind her were some of her eight children. Cats darted up and down the front steps, which were garlanded with Christmas decorations. Johnson introduced herself and said that she was concerned about Jisaiah's and King's attendance and wanted to see if there was anything the family needed to help them get to school.

"This is King," Prude said, gesturing to a slender boy with wary eyes, "and this is Jisaiah"—a girl with her hair in thick side buns. Prude, a friendly thirty-two-year-old with multiple nose and lip studs, said she had woken the two up that morning, but they had gone back to bed, assuming she would be at her job, as a security guard at the Fillmore Detroit entertainment venue. By the time she discovered that they hadn't left for school, it seemed too late to send them. She had set up a nanny cam to see what was going on at the house when she was away, she said, but the cats had chewed it up. She hadn't been aware until recently how many days they had missed; she had noticed some attempted calls from their school but hadn't realized what they were about.

"I tell them, 'Y'all are going to get me in trouble for this,'" she told Johnson.

"This is not anything like truancy. We come from a place of support," Johnson said, in her characteristically upbeat tone. "But, yes, it could lead to that, if they're not in school, so we want to make sure they understand."

Back in the S.U.V., Johnson's composure briefly fell away. "Wow, they are too little to be skipping," she said under her breath.

Johnson is part of an increasingly popular approach to combatting truancy: she makes home visits to learn why children are missing school and then works with families and schools to get them back on track. She oversees a team of six people in southeastern Michigan who are employed by a Baltimore company called Concentric Educational Solutions, which has contracts with seven small school districts in the Detroit area. Since 2021, she has been driving back and forth across the Downriver towns southwest of the city, a vast expanse of dollar stores, pot dispensaries, and manufacturing plants—some active, some abandoned. She passes the Marathon refinery, the Great Lakes Steel Works, and the giant Ford Rouge Complex, where this fall she could see the picket line of the United Auto Workers strike.

The strike ended. The crisis that Johnson was dealing with, on the other hand, seemed never-ending. Absenteeism has long been a problem in the Detroit area, as in other places with high poverty rates, but since the coronavirus pandemic it has worsened dramatically. Nationwide, the rate of chronic absenteeism—defined as missing at least ten

In the past few years, chronic absenteeism has almost doubled.

ILLUSTRATION BY OWEN GENT

per cent of school days, or eighteen in a year—nearly doubled between 2018-19 and 2021-22, to twenty-eight per cent of students, according to data compiled for the Associated Press by Thomas Dee, a professor of education at Stanford. Michigan's rate was thirty-nine per cent, the third highest among states. States that have reported data for the most recent school year showed only minimal improvement; some cities have rates of more than forty per cent.

Absenteeism underlies much of what has beset young people in recent years, including falling school achievement, deteriorating mental health—exacerbated by social isolation—and elevated youth violence and car thefts, some occurring during school hours. But schools are using relatively little of the billions of dollars that they received in federal pandemic-recovery funds to address absenteeism. The issue has also attracted surprisingly little attention from leaders, elected or otherwise, and education coverage in the national media has focussed heavily on culture-war fights.

This void created an opportunity for a fledgling company like Concentric. Founded in 2010, by David Heiber, a former school administrator, the company grew slowly. It had only about twenty employees before COVID ignited the business. Concentric now has more than a hundred employees, and it recently received a five-million-dollar investment from a social-venture-capital firm to fuel expansion.

"Right place, right time, right pandemic," Heiber told me sardonically.

Kuanticka Prude had her first child when she was thirteen, so she finished her education at the city's maternity academy. Before that, though, she'd liked going to school. "It was fun! Who wanted to be at home and listen to your mom complain all day?" she told me, when I spoke with her after Johnson's visit. "But, then, we didn't have COVID and cities being shut down."

During the pandemic, Detroit's public schools, where her kids were enrolled at the time, remained closed to in-person instruction for nearly a year. "They did school online. I hated it," she said. "They took it as a joke most of the time, playing in class, because they felt like they were at home and they could do that." After the family moved to Ecorse, last summer, the mind-set lingered. "They got too comfortable at home," she said.

This is a dynamic that Johnson has repeatedly encountered. When classes were virtual, students would log on some days, and some days they wouldn't. The world did not end. For parents, it might seem easier that way. No dragging kids out of bed before daybreak. No wrestling them into proper clothes. No getting them to the bus stop as one's own work waited. "You were able to just do the things you needed to do," Johnson said. "Everybody was comfortable. It was, 'I can go to my computer, my baby is in my room on the computer. We're good.'"

After that hiatus, relearning old behaviors was hard. "If I were a child, and I could stay at home on my computer, in my room, and play with my little toys on the side, pick up the game for your break or lunchtime, how hard is it to sit in a school building for seven hours?" she said. "It takes us to help build those habits, and I don't think just one person can do it alone."

Some parents, unimpressed by what instruction consisted of during remote learning, didn't see missing school as that consequential. Some simply liked having their kids around. "You're dealing with a different generation here. This is a parent generation that plays video games with their children," Steven McGhee, the superintendent of the Harper Woods district, another Concentric client near Detroit, said. "When we were kids, we were out of the house and at school. There was no option. This became optional."

Even before COVID, some students in the Detroit area had been able to choose online-only learning as an offering from public or charter schools. Since the pandemic, many schools have made it easier for students to try to catch up from missed days with online material.

The spectrum from in-person to virtual to nothing at all can get pretty fuzzy. One early afternoon, I saw an eight-year-old boy with headphones on standing outside a house in Ecorse, playing a video game on a tablet. His mother had died of a heroin overdose two years earlier, and his father said that he had enrolled his son in an online academy, because their housing situation was uncertain. Usually, there were three hours of instruction daily, he said, but the Wi-Fi hadn't been working properly. "He's done for the day," his father said.

Families faced other hurdles as well. One student's father had died a month earlier, and in the previous six months two of his grandparents had also died; his mother was suffering from heart disease that prevented her from working, and she could no longer afford school clothes. Johnson alerted the student's principal, who had a special fund for such needs.

The mother of a middle-school girl had been in a car crash; when a Concentric employee visited, the mother had trouble even coming to the door, and she explained that she couldn't get her daughter to school anymore. A high-school boy had moved in with his grandmother, but he was sleeping on the porch for lack of a bed; Concentric bought him one. A superintendent purchased a washer and dryer after hearing from Concentric that some students weren't coming to school because they didn't have any clean clothes. "Once you have these conversations, you know that there are real-life events that happen, there are real-life circumstances, where they're just not able," Johnson said.

Still, there were circumstances in which negligence did seem to be an issue. Johnson, who is thirty-four and has three kids, could feel her natural sympathy being tested: "I've had a parent tell me, 'Well, hey, she wasn't there because of my life problems.' I get it, but you can't just leave a student out of school because you have issues."

Sometimes parents asked Johnson if she was a truant officer, and she would reply, "No, I'm a professional student advocate," which was what Concentric called its outreach workers. "If you're a truant officer, they're defensive," she told me. "They automatically assume you're here to get them in trouble."

Within the U.S., the concept of mandatory schooling can be traced to the seventeenth century, when the Puritans of Massachusetts positioned it as fundamental to Christian society, but this tenet was challenged by the Industrial Revolution, as children went to work in the mills. After Massachusetts instituted compulsory-schooling policies in the eighteen-forties and fifties, enforcement was spotty. But, in 1873, the state passed a law requiring attendance between the ages of eight and twelve, for at least twenty weeks a year. The law was enforced by agents of the school committee—truant officers—with fines of up to five dollars per week. Sixteen years later, the age range was expanded to fourteen, and a year after that the required term became thirty weeks a year. W. E. B. Du Bois, reflecting on his upbringing in western Massachusetts in the eighteen-seventies and eighties, emphasized his school routine. "I was brought up from earliest years with the idea of regular attendance at school," he wrote. "This was partly because the schools of Great Barrington were near at hand, simple but good, well-taught, and truant laws were enforced."

By the 1890-91 school year, more than two hundred of Massachusetts's three hundred and fifty-one towns had an average daily attendance of ninety per cent, and only eleven were below eighty per cent. During the following decades, mandatory schooling spread nationwide. William Reese, a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin, found that just six per cent of adolescents were in high school in 1890 but that by 1930 half of them were. By 1950, attendance was so universal that those who weren't in school were called dropouts. "By the early twentieth century, the truth is that you're supposed to be in school, and, in the long reach of history, that's a remarkable fact," Reese told me. "It became a universal norm. Other European nations sort of caught up eventually, but America was in the vanguard of this."

Cities often employed truant officers, who roamed the streets searching for children to corral, and repeat offenders risked being brought to juvenile court. But in recent decades many areas have moved away from legal remedies, following a general shift toward less punitive juvenile justice. In addition, experts—citing psychology literature and evidence from states that still meted out consequences—argued that threats were unlikely to be effective. "Punitive rather than positive is not the best approach," Michael Gottfried, an economist at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, said.

Enforcement of state truancy laws has grown rarer. In August, Missouri's highest court affirmed the sentencing of two parents to at least a week in jail for their young children's absences, but most of the movement has been in the other direction. In 2019, for instance, New Mexico removed the role of district attorneys in enforcing attendance. (The state, which had some of the longest school closures, saw its chronic absenteeism rates more than double after the pandemic, to forty per cent, the second-highest rate among states, after Alaska.)

The case of Kamala Harris is instructive. As the San Francisco district attorney in the mid-two-thousands, she made headlines for prosecuting parents of extremely truant students. "I believe that a child going without an education is tantamount to a crime," Harris said, during her run for state attorney general, in 2010. "So, I decided I was going to start prosecuting parents for truancy." During that campaign, she pushed for a statewide law that made it a misdemeanor for parents if their kids were chronically absent, punishable by a fine of up to two thousand dollars or a year in jail. In 2013, the state amended the law, giving school principals more leeway to excuse absences.

When Harris ran for the 2020 Democratic nomination for President, she received heavy criticism for her efforts. She expressed contrition, saying that she had hoped the law would simply prod districts to offer more resources to aid truant students. "My regret is that I have now heard stories where, in some jurisdictions, D.A.s have criminalized the parents," she said. "And I regret that that has happened."

In recent years, however, efforts to fight absenteeism have tended to involve nudges, not threats. In 2015, Todd Rogers, a behavioral scientist at Harvard, co-founded EveryDay Labs, which sent letters and text messages to families with reminders about the importance of school, and statistics about how their children's attendance compared with classmates'. Parents could also respond to a chatbot about challenges that they were facing in getting their kids to school. The company was hired by some fifty school districts, but its approach was most effective with milder cases of absenteeism, less so with more severe ones.

David Heiber, Concentric's founder, is an advocate of direct intervention, perhaps because he wishes he had received it when he was young. Heiber, who is forty-seven, was brought up in Delaware by his maternal grandparents. He had some contact with his mother, a white woman who suffered from alcoholism, but he did not know his father, who was Black, until he was an adult. His grandfather, whom he called Dad, was a truck driver, and he and Heiber's grandmother—Mom—provided him with a stable middle-class upbringing. In high school, he was a track star who attracted scholarship offers.

In his senior year, his grandfather had a fatal heart attack while Christmas shopping. Heiber went back to school just two days later and, receiving no social-work support—although a gym teacher let him play Ping-Pong for hours on end—he "spun out of control," he told me. He was expelled from school, convicted of burglary, and sentenced to some five years in prison. While he was incarcerated, his grandmother died of cancer. "I just decided, Something has to happen," he said. "I got to do something."

He earned his G.E.D. behind bars and a judge released him after twenty-seven months, on the condition that he enroll in college. He attended Lincoln University, a historically Black institution in Pennsylvania, and got a job teaching high school in Baltimore, which he did for a year before taking an administrative position at a different local high school. But, in 2006, he faced one set of misdemeanor charges related to a breakup, which were later dropped, and another set, he told me, for his role interceding in a fight between students at a high school in Washington, D.C., which he had been visiting as an observer. That case resulted in four years of probation. "It was a rough period," Heiber said. "Very few people go in a straight trajectory."

In 2007, he moved to Washington, D.C., to become the director of student services for a small group of charter schools. One day, Heiber and some colleagues were wondering what to do about truant students, and it occurred to him that one lived just across the street from the school. He suggested going to the student's home. There, his grandmother said that he was attending a different school. For Heiber, it was an epiphany: to get the right information, you needed to go to students' homes, both to show families that the system cared about them and to gain a better understanding of what was keeping the students away—unreliable transportation, depression, lack of clothes, or myriad other factors. "There was a list of maybe two hundred or so, and we just thought, Ask them questions," he said.

Heiber came to realize that there was an art to conducting visits in ways that didn't make families feel judged. In one home, a cockroach fell onto his shoulder, and he managed to keep himself from recoiling, "because it would have made the whole conversation go different," he said.

In 2010, he was approached by the NewSchools Venture Fund, a philanthropy looking to invest in Black entrepreneurs. He received a hundred and fifty thousand dollars to help create Concentric, with the initial aim of advising districts on how to improve home visits by teachers. But it became apparent that many districts were having trouble getting teachers to do home visits at all and, instead, were interested in having Concentric do them.

Heiber embraced the new mission, becoming an evangelist for what he saw as an underappreciated aspect of the education system. Most school systems "pay the least amount of money for the most important job," he said. "I'm not saying that teaching is not a very important job. But they got to be in school to be taught."

His initial contracts were primarily in Detroit. He met several administrators in the school system there, mostly Black men roughly his own age, who then left to lead districts in the city's working-class inner suburbs. They hired Concentric and recommended it to others in the region.

"The recipe requires only one pot, but the prep requires six spoons, nine bowls of varying sizes, and the neighbor's immersion blender."

The frequent travel to Detroit was a strain on Heiber and his family, as was the scramble for new clients. He incurred bills for unpaid taxes and home improvements, leading to court proceedings in Prince George's County, a Maryland suburb of Washington where he lived. Then came the post-pandemic boom, with new business in Maryland districts. Contracts ranged from fifty thousand dollars for home visits in a small district to several million dollars for home visits, plus mentoring and tutoring, in some large ones. In 2021 and 2022, Concentric hired dozens of employees, many of them young Black college graduates. It gave them two weeks of training, which included instruction as basic as how to knock on doors. "I tell everyone, 'Knock a little harder, but don't knock like the police,'" a Concentric manager said. The job mostly paid on an hourly basis, as much as thirty-five dollars per hour. The "professional student advocates" dressed well, in black polo shirts with the company logo or, sometimes, in suits. "I didn't want people to go into a building and not know that they were our P.S.A.s," Heiber said.

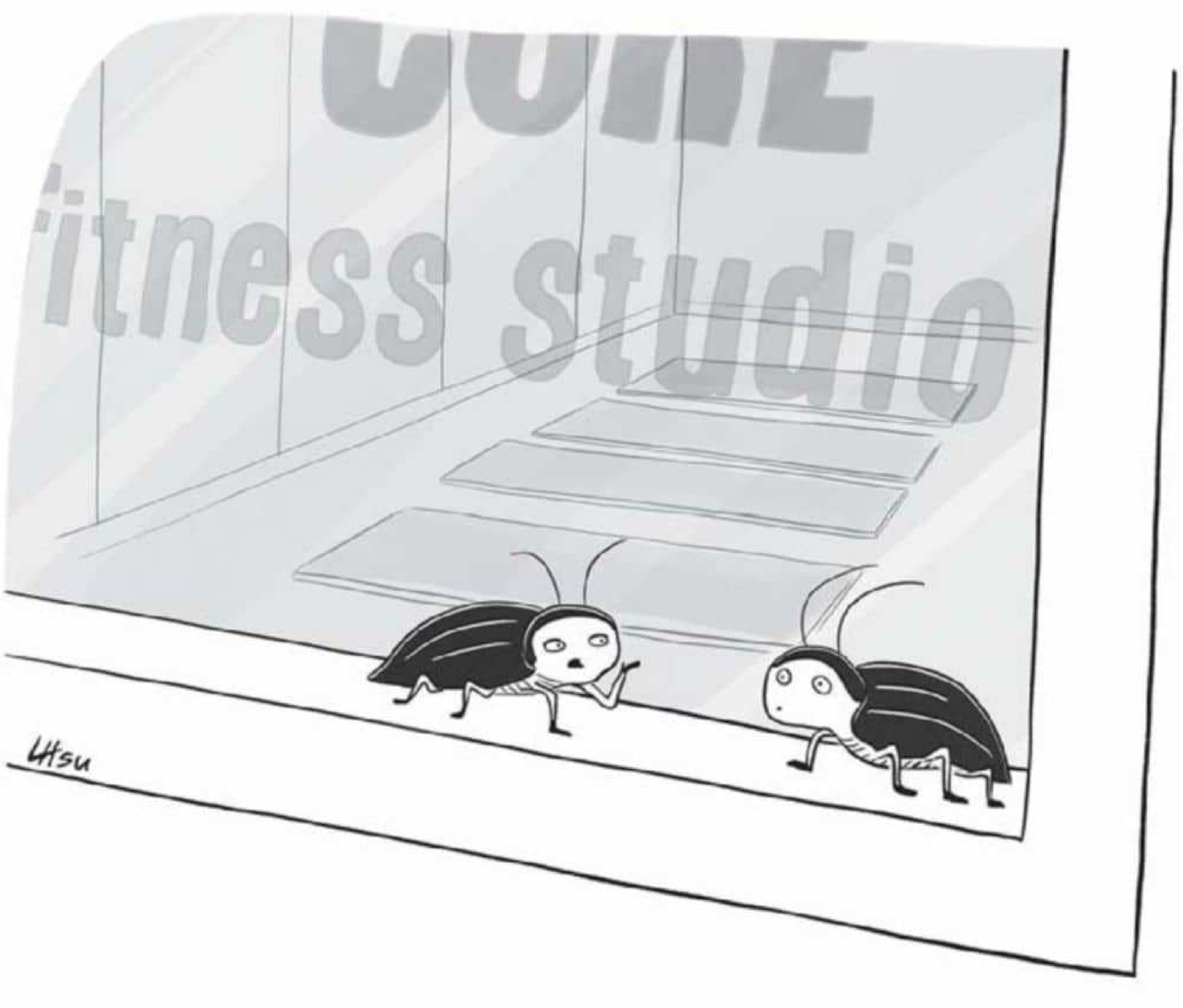
The company's rapid expansion, with revenue reaching eight million dollars last academic year, brought growing pains. Some employees went weeks without getting paid, as income from new contracts arrived too late for payroll, and the company had to turn to lenders, several of whom later filed suit for nonpayment. (Most of the legal actions against Concentric and Heiber have been settled.)

Concentric's growth only accelerated as the new school year began. For many districts, tracking down missing students was existential. Several million children had left public schools for private and parochial ones or for homeschooling; several hundred thousand were simply unaccounted for. With fewer students, some districts faced teacher layoffs and school closures.

To bring more order to the expansion, Heiber hired experienced managers. In early October came an announcement that a firm called New Markets Venture Partners was investing five million dollars in Concentric.

One of the firm's partners, who was in charge of the investment, told Heiber that Concentric was worth fifteen million dollars. The federal pandemic funding that some districts were using to pay Concentric would fade in 2024, but many districts were using state money, which would continue. "He thinks we could be a hundred-and-fifty-million-dollar business in five to seven years," Heiber said.

Every few weeks, Concentric received a fresh list of absent kids from each district, often about fifty names. Shepria Johnson's list brought her to tiny bungalows, ramshackle apartments, and public-housing complexes. Sometimes



"And then on ab day they roll on their backs, flail, and mimic us in the throes of death."

• •

she arrived at homes that appeared abandoned. "I pull up and am, like, No way, nobody lives here," she said. "And I would knock on the door, and I see people peeking out, and I think, Oh, my God, someone *does* live here."

She was able to stave off demoralization by feeling a purpose far greater than she'd had at her previous jobs—she'd worked as a manager at a shoe store and at a Verizon store, while making efforts to complete her college degree. "You don't know what you'll go and see, but if you're not doing it then you can't help," she said. "It doesn't make me sad anymore, it's just, 'How can I help?'"

She took pride in her ability to get parents to open up to her. "They go off of your energy. If you're at the door, and you're upset with me, I'm not going to get upset with you," she said. "We should all consider the person on the other side of the door. *We* know what we're trying to do—we're trying to make a difference—but they don't know that when we're knocking at the door."

The conversation was only the first half of the job; next was relaying what information she had learned to school officials or to Concentric employees stationed at schools. A mother in a mobile-home park said that her son, who was in high school, needed tutoring; another mother said that her son was always late to school because he hated algebra, his first period, and suggested changing his schedule. Even when Johnson found an address uninhabited, with nothing but a can of air freshener visible in the empty living room, she considered it useful, because it alerted the school that it needed updated contact information for a student.

These sorts of home visits are so new that there has been little chance to assess them. A Johns Hopkins University evaluation of Concentric in the Baltimore school district—its largest contract—during the 2021-22 school year reported that a majority of home visits found nobody there. The evaluators struggled to judge the impact even of the visits that did reach family members, because there was no attendance data from the pandemic year of 2020-21 to compare the new numbers with.

The Johns Hopkins study found, however, that school administrators praised the company's efforts. Superintendents in Michigan echoed this praise. "The number of companies that pledge or promise to address inequities or deficits that are experienced in urban schools—it's exhausting," Derrick Coleman, the superintendent of Michigan's River Rouge school district, told me. But Concentric, he said, is "able to go into places that many educators are reluctant to go into, for safety reasons, and make families feel comfortable. They create psychological safety to share whatever those challenges are. And that then gives us data and information to make adjustments."

Connecticut, which has launched a home-visit initiative in fifteen districts, has taken a slightly different approach: outreach workers call ahead to schedule visits with families, which can last longer than an hour. A study found that the program—which is carried out by school employees or community members and which has cost twenty-four million dollars—resulted in an increase in attendance of fifteen to twenty per cent among middle and high schoolers nine months after the first visit.

But Johnson preferred arriving unscheduled, believing that it gave her a clearer picture of the household context. "When you're on the spot, you have the pure parent," she said. "If you schedule it, they're prepared, they already know why you're coming, they already know their story, but you're not getting the raw reason."

On a couple of occasions, visits by members of Michigan's Concentric team uncovered situations so troubling that they prompted calls to child-protective services. More often, the team found a different recourse. Michigan is one of the few states that still enforce legal repercussions for truancy: a school police officer or administrator or a Concentric P.S.A. can send a JC 01 form to the prosecutor's office for Wayne County, where most of the Concentric districts are.

If the prosecutor's office finds sufficient evidence, it typically offers students who are ten or older a diversion program—the chance to improve attendance and have their records wiped clean. If that fails, students may be brought before a judge. (Cases of younger kids are referred to the adult division, and charges may be brought against their parents.)

Johnson, her colleagues, and the superintendents in the Concentric districts in Wayne County all said that the JC 01 forms have been a valuable tool in the most extreme cases—sometimes the court would even threaten to block parents' welfare payments. "It was very powerful," Josha Talison, the superintendent in Ecorse, said.

But during the pandemic, the superintendents said, the process broke down—it took much longer to hear from the prosecutor's office about forms that had been filed. "When the pandemic started, they just stopped doing it," Talison told me. Stiles Simmons, his counterpart in the Westwood district, which is nearby, told me the same. "The courthouse pretty much shut down," he said. "And then there was a backlog."

(Robert Heimbuch, the chief of the juvenile division at the prosecutor's office, said that his team had continued to handle JC 01 forms, shifting meetings and hearings to Zoom, but that some steps in the process might have taken longer. He didn't know if referrals for chronically absent students had fallen off, because JC 01s were filed for all manner of juvenile-delinquency cases, and his office did not keep a tally of how many were for truancy.)

After a morning of home visits with Johnson, I met with Sarah Lenhoff, a professor of education policy at Wayne State University, who started studying absenteeism in 2016. She joined a coalition to tackle the problem in Detroit and became convinced that the crisis is now so severe that it requires a greater response. "We're thinking about school attendance all wrong," she said. "It's societal."

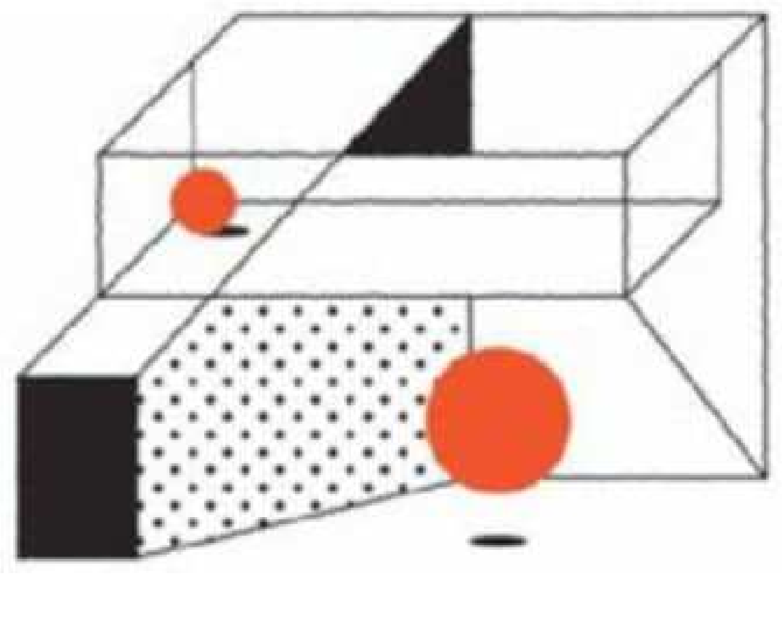
Several of the Wayne County superintendents working with Concentric agreed. "The issue of chronic absenteeism is much broader than what the school and its partners can handle," Simmons said. "There needs to be something else done." It was a compelling argument: throughout the country, local and state government officials, school boards, and others had decided that it was in the public interest to close school buildings for a year or more, and now it was going to take a group effort to rebuild the norms. The issue couldn't be left to individual schools or districts—or to a single company.

Society, as a whole, needed to reinforce—as it had in Massachusetts more than a century ago—the importance of school. It was where children awakened to the world's opportunities, where they learned how to be productive citizens, and, for some, where they found a daily routine and regular meals.

Instead, as Lenhoff noted, families often got the opposite message. Inadequate infrastructure had led Detroit to cancel school for several days last year, because of excessive heat. Schools had also closed in the face of forecasts of snow which brought no actual snow. Districts get penalized by the state's funding formula if attendance drops below seventy-five per cent on any day, and so they may close schools when they fear that too few kids will show up. "If you have that happen often enough, it does erode your feeling that the system is there for us, and not just when it's convenient for them," Lenhoff said.

One day, shortly after noon, I encountered several fifteen- and sixteen-year-old boys who had recently arrived from Latin America and were walking a dog in the quiet streets of River Rouge. But they weren't playing hooky. School had been closed that day, owing to plumbing problems.

A short drive away, a middle-school girl was playing in a front yard, while her older sister and some of her friends, in their late teens and early twenties, were hanging out in a nearby car, one with a baby on her lap. The younger sister was also not missing school: it had been only a half day in her district, to allow for professional-development courses.



Asked why absenteeism had increased, the young women didn't hesitate. "That's what the corona did," Serenity, who is twenty-one, told me. Now "they're sending the kids back to school, and they don't want to no more. They want to stay home and play on their computers."

When December arrived, the weather became another obstacle: leaving home was even less appealing when it was dark and cold out. One mother told Johnson that her son had been missing school because she hadn't been able to buy him a winter jacket.

Another mother told Johnson that she had just been crying on the toilet: her rent had doubled, so she wasn't going to be able to afford Christmas presents for her kids. The rent increase had forced her to pick up a second job, at a fast-food restaurant, which had disrupted her school drop-off and pickup routines. Johnson alerted the children's school and suggested that it put the family on its list for gift donations.

In Ecorse, Kuanticka Prude was worried about money, too. She had less coming in now than a year earlier, when she had been working a second job, at a Wendy's. The reason her nanny cam wasn't working, she told me, was not the cats, as she had said to Johnson, but because she couldn't afford the monthly payments.

But she told me that she might quit her security job, too, to better monitor the schooling of her kids, who also included a girl in ninth grade, twin girls about to turn eight (who were in special-education programs), and a four-year-old girl in preschool. "I'm going to get it together," she said. With Jisaiah and King, "it's going to take me to sit them down and talk to them really good and let them know, to understand what they're doing and causing. Because this is not a game or a joke. Not only can you get people in trouble but you need an education."

The next morning, it was just getting light as Jisaiah and King were scheduled to bring their little sister two blocks away for her preschool bus. A cat pawed at the front door, as if to remind them. And then they emerged. They were a few minutes late, which meant that King needed to wave at the bus as Jisaiah hustled her sister down the sidewalk, a hand on her shoulder. Then Prude's mother emerged to load the two of them and their older sister into her car. On this day, they were going to make it. ♦

LETTER FROM TEXAS

THE LIFE OF THE MOTHER

A high-risk pregnancy in a climate of fear about abortion.

BY STEPHANIA TALADRID

LEGAL NAME OF DECEASED
Yeniifer Alvarez-Estrada Glick

DATE OF DEATH—ACTUAL OR PRESUMED
July 10, 2022

MARITAL STATUS AT TIME OF DEATH
☑ Married

IF DEATH OCCURRED IN A HOSPITAL
☑ ER/Outpatient

IF FEMALE
☑ Pregnant at time of death

LOCATION (CITY/TOWN AND STATE)
Luling, TX

MANNER OF DEATH
☑ Pending Investigation

Yeniifer Alvarez arrived in central Texas from San Luis Potosí, Mexico, in 1998. At three, she was just old enough to have a sense of a world left behind: the fire that warmed the house in the evening, the meat hung to dry outside the door, and *la bisabuela*, her adored great-grandmother, who had died shortly before Yeni and her mom went north. In Luling, Yeni, her parents, aunts, and grandmother settled into a cramped house with a tin roof that was down the street from her great-uncles, the first members of the family to discover the town's decent jobs, in the oil fields.

Black gold had been gushing there since the nineteen-twenties, and a sulfurous odor hung in the air. To this day, when the smell drifts fifty miles north, people in Austin call it "the Luling effect." Yeni's father worked in oil, too, but it wasn't long before he was deported. Yeni's mother, Leticia, stayed and got a job in the kitchen of a local Mexican restaurant, where the pay was modest but no one was asking about papers. Every morning, Yeni and her little brother Michael rode to a red brick schoolhouse in a car overstuffed with other kids. At the wheel was a neighbor who, for a dollar a day, took care of children whose parents' workdays started well before class did.

Leticia divorced, remarried, and took a second job, at a poultry plant. She had two more sons, and she relied on Yeni to help raise them. Pedro, born when Yeni was ten, received a diagnosis of autism; he was so sensitive to sound that raindrops on the roof could make him spiral, and on the rare occasion when he spoke Yeni understood that he'd given each word serious thought. Francisco, who arrived when she was thirteen, was vulnerable, too—bullied in elementary school, he retreated to studying online.

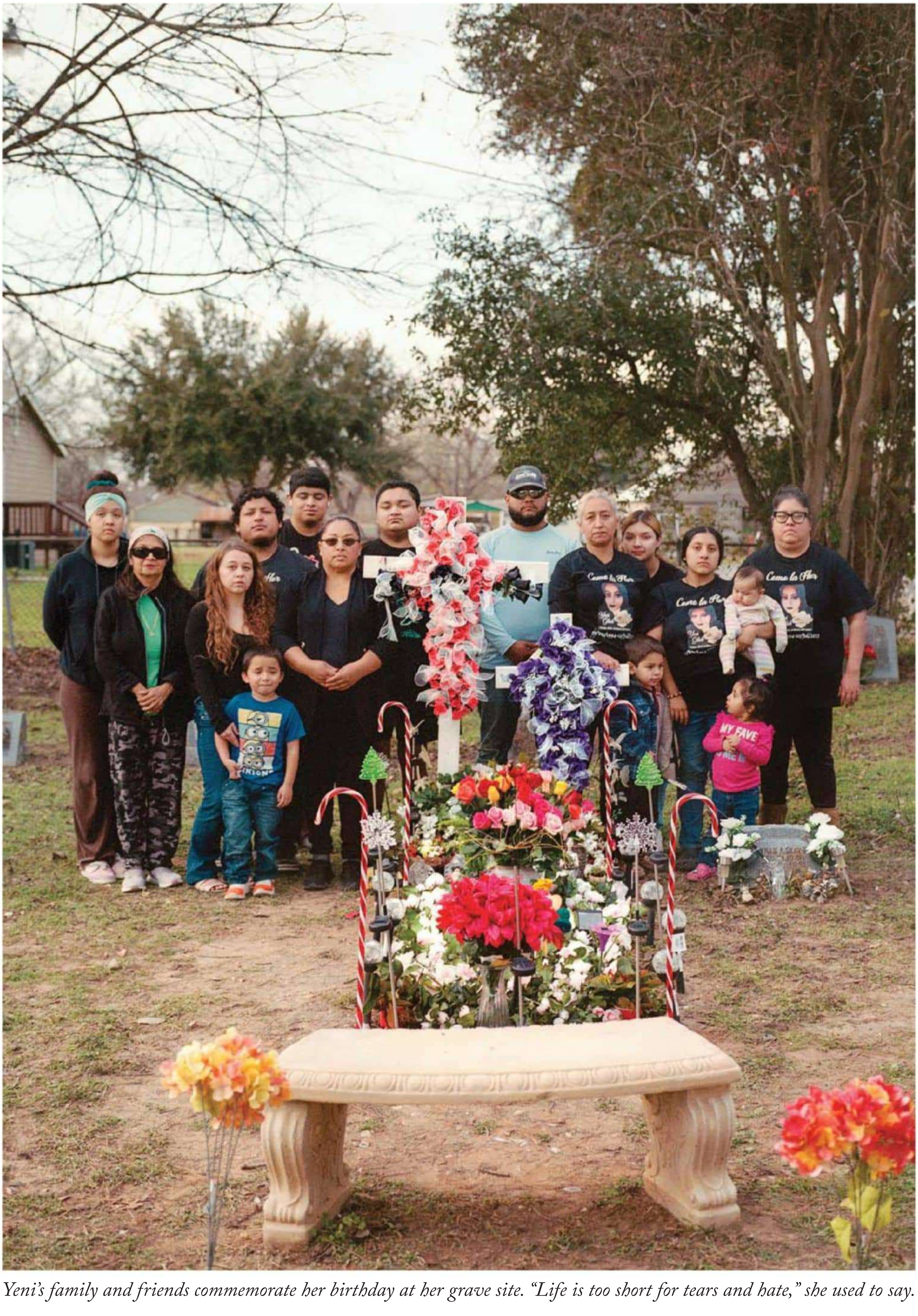
By the time Yeni went to high school, she'd become the nerve center of her extended-family operation. She was the one who fretted over a mortgage payment; followed up on the applications for disability that she filed for her cousin, who'd had a stroke at sixteen; warned family members when politicians were stoking rage against the undocumented; and made the delicate decision about whether to call the police when Pedro, alarmed by something he couldn't articulate, ran away. Only at school did the pressure ease up.

Whereas other teen-age girls in Luling dreamed of being crowned Watermelon Thump Queen at the annual farmers' festival, Yeni's hope was to become a scientist. One day, she imagined, she'd have a college degree—chemistry or biology, she hadn't decided—and buy a home in Wimberley, a pretty Hill Country town forty miles west of Luling. She could almost see the ranch house, nestled in the woods, with extra bedrooms for Leticia and the boys. She could still almost see the place years later, her mother said, after scholarships had been turned down for lack of a Social Security number and she was a certified nursing aide cutting toenails at Hillcrest Manor, a nursing home near one where her brother Michael worked as a janitor.

"Life is too short for tears and hate," she always said, and comfort could be found in blasting Queen Bey in the car on the way home from work, in laughing with friends at an over-the-top burlesque cabaret, and in her boyfriend, an Army Reserve specialist named Andrew Glick. He wasn't as liberal as she was, but they shared a skewed sense of humor and a longing for experiences more vibrant than those afforded by rural Texas. Andrew loved anime, wanted to go to Tokyo, and didn't balk when Yeni made it clear that, should the two of them stay together and leave Luling, her younger siblings would be coming along. She called them her *niños*—the children she'd had without getting pregnant.

The wedding was in November, 2021, and on the preceding evenings Andrew received a crash course in ranchera. The mariachis were driving six hours for a single night—there could be no disappointments on the dance floor. After the ceremony, in a barn flanked by oak trees, Yeni, twenty-six, swayed in a tulle ball gown, a silver tiara, and the longest veil she could find. The following month, Yeni announced with joy that she was pregnant. The only downside, she told her mom, was that she and Andrew, who had moved in with the family, would be deferring their plan to leave Luling. Where else but in this stinker of a town would there be so many aunts and cousins excited to meet a newborn, and to help?

Luling's sole general hospital, Ascension Seton Edgar B. Davis, is named for the God-fearing shoemaker who discovered that the town was sitting on oil. The hospital's helipad has a canary-yellow signal that reads "LOW FLYING AIRCRAFT." In Caldwell County, where Luling is situated, more than a quarter of the people under sixty-five

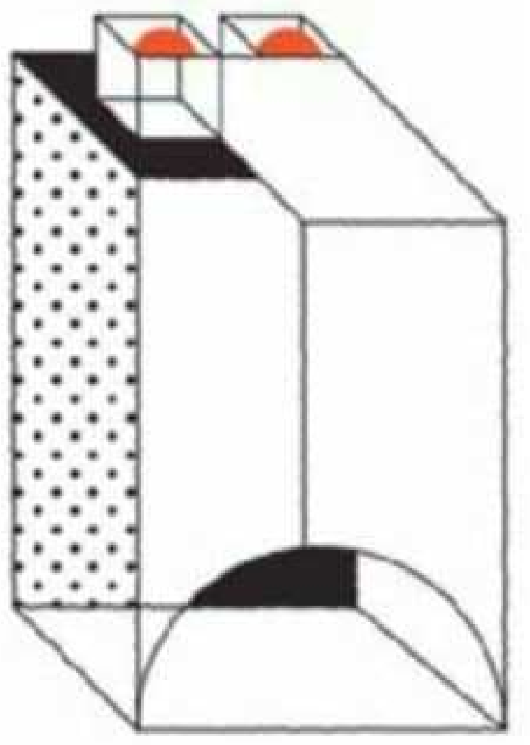


Yeni's family and friends commemorate her birthday at her grave site. "Life is too short for tears and hate," she used to say.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CARLOS JARAMILLO

are uninsured, according to a recent census estimate; for some of them, delaying medical care until it becomes urgent is a way of life. Critically ill people, including women who are pregnant, often arrive at the hospital only to be rushed to better-equipped facilities somewhere else.

The hospital's labor-and-delivery unit closed years ago, and there is no ob-gyn on site. The women in Yeni's family, like most women in Luling, were used to travelling to Kyle, thirty miles northwest, or to Austin, for routine care. But sometimes a pregnancy-related crisis is too urgent to allow for travel time, and the Luling emergency room—with four beds and one doctor—is the only place to go.



By 2022, two hospital employees told me, the number of women giving birth in the Luling E.R. was surging. They recalled seeing only five or six births in the previous decade. Now it felt like "uncontrolled chaos," one of them said. Babies were being delivered in the waiting room, or crowning on a stretcher in the hallway, the four beds being occupied.

The two employees were accustomed to seeing early miscarriages or the swift delivery of someone's fourth child. But lately women were coming in with more varied and complex conditions, and at times the E.R. felt like a neonatal intensive-care unit—but one lacking the equipment to properly handle sick babies. The hospital's single baby-warming crib was discovered, during a birth, to be missing a wheel; a nurse had to prop it up with her feet to prevent the newborn from falling out while the doctor received obstetrics counsel over the phone from a specialist in Austin.

"Anything that fails in society, anything that's broken, ends up being the emergency room's problem," one of the employees told me. Both of them suspected that the surge was being driven by diminished access to abortions, following the enactment, in 2021, of a state law known as S.B. 8, which banned the procedure after the sixth week of pregnancy in nearly all cases. A Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health study recently showed that, in a nine-month period following the passage of S.B. 8, nearly ten thousand additional babies were born in Texas.

What conservative lawmakers hailed as the saving of infant lives, medical professionals I interviewed in rural Texas saw as a beleaguering challenge. According to state data, even before S.B. 8 half the counties in Texas were unequipped to treat pregnant women, lacking a single specialist in women's health, such as an ob-gyn or a certified midwife. Multiple doctors told me that the overturning of Roe v. Wade, in June of 2022, exacerbated the crisis, as practitioners retired early or moved to states where they'd have more liberty to make medical judgments. So who, exactly, was supposed to handle the extra deliveries in women's-health deserts such as Caldwell County? What would become of women in remote locales who experienced a hemorrhage or a ruptured fallopian tube?

Although it was illegal for the E.R. to turn away patients who needed urgent care, hospital workers in Luling couldn't hide their reservations. "This is not the place you want to be," one of them told pregnant patients. "It could end up tragic." There wouldn't be an anesthesiologist on hand to numb the pain with an epidural, much less an expert in maternal-fetal medicine. Not every patient was in a position to travel elsewhere, however. If a pregnant woman visited the Luling E.R. three times in a row, staff came to assume that she'd end up delivering there, whether they were prepared or not.

Yeni was among the uninsured, and when her teeth hurt or drug-store creams weren't curing a rash, she turned to the Luling E.R. Over time, the staff came to know her and her ailments. In her mid-twenties, she learned that she had hypertension, or high blood pressure, and diabetes. Both conditions ran in her family; Yeni began storing her insulin next to her mother's in the fridge.

After COVID-19 peaked in Luling, Yeni fell ill, and she was hospitalized with pulmonary edema, a condition, in which the lungs fill with fluid, that strains the heart and can be fatal. Another long-term complication was her weight, which rarely dipped below two hundred and sixty pounds. For all these reasons, when Yeni became pregnant she was a high-risk patient.

Seven weeks into her pregnancy, in late January, 2022, Yeni messaged Andrew: "Slight breathing problems." A few days later, she woke up bleeding. Her first instinct was to call her mother. 'Does it hurt?,' Leticia asked. It didn't, but Yeni was too scared to trust her mother's theory that miscarriages were accompanied by pain. She raced to the E.R., where her case was termed a "threatened miscarriage." An ultrasound showed normal fetal growth; her blood pressure, however, had spiked to a worrisome 185/98.

Although some women with the same conditions as Yeni—hypertension, diabetes, a history of pulmonary edema, severe obesity—end up safely delivering healthy babies, others become so unwell that a difficult question arises: Is this a pregnancy that the patient can safely continue? Some studies show that cardiovascular diseases account for more than a third of pregnancy-related deaths in the U.S. "When a pregnant patient comes to you with a history of pulmonary edema, the question is: What is the cause, and can it be managed or reversed?," Uri Elkayam, the director of the maternal-cardiology program at the University of Southern California, told me. "Pregnancy increases blood volume, and with limited cardiac reserves the pressure from the heart may be reflected into the lungs, causing pulmonary edema and heart failure." His rule of thumb is that, if a patient is fairly sick early on, "one needs to assume that as pregnancy progresses things only will get worse." In those cases, he said, termination lowers the risk of death.

According to Yeni's medical records, doctors didn't raise the possibility of a therapeutic termination with her. Ascension Seton, a network of Catholic hospitals whose mission is "rooted in the loving ministry of Jesus," is averse to abortions. But, as some medical professionals familiar with Yeni's care told me, the hospitals can make an exception when a woman's life is at risk. The field of obstetrics is replete with gray areas, and in the past a physician with a borderline case could direct the patient to another facility, with fewer restrictions on abortion. But that option effectively disappeared in the months before Yeni got pregnant.

When S.B. 8 banned abortions past the six-week limit, it included an exception in cases of "medical emergency." At the same time, the law made it tricky for health-care workers to raise the emergency flag, by enabling citizens to initiate lawsuits against people who "aid or abet" banned abortions, incentivizing them with the possibility of a ten-thousand-dollar reward. A person involved with Yeni's medical case told me, "One of the things that S.B. 8 does is undermine a sense of common mission and trust, even within a care-giving team—you know, who's going to go behind your back and sue you because they watched you do your care?"

After the bleeding episode, Yeni left the E.R. with a referral to Jessica Mueller, an ob-gyn who is part of the Ascension Seton network in Kyle. After making the appointment, Yeni had to find someone to cover her shift at a home-care job that she'd recently started: attending to a man with quadriplegia, whose ability to eat, drink, and bathe depended on her. Once she made it to Kyle, Mueller informed her that her hypertension remained severe, and she needed to be admitted to the hospital.

This was news that Yeni could not afford to hear. As it was, she could barely keep up with her medical expenses—this visit alone was costing her two hundred and fifty dollars, out of pocket. Undocumented pregnant women can be eligible for government-funded health coverage, and Yeni had applied for it but hadn't received a response. "I don't know what to do," she'd texted Andrew shortly before the appointment with Mueller. "I just dropped 500 plus my car payment to get it out of the way so I'm left with 200 that's not even enough to cover cost and I'm just done I don't know what to do. They won't help me unless I get insurance but I can't get insurance."

Mueller could not convince Yeni, now ten weeks pregnant, to be hospitalized, but she did her best to warn her patient about the dangers of skipping doses of blood-pressure medication, which Yeni sometimes did because the drugs could make her nauseated or sleepy, inhibiting her ability to do her job. If she did not get her blood pressure and glucose under control, Mueller said, she would be at risk of having a heart attack, a stroke, or a miscarriage. Medical records do not suggest any discussion of the fact that an abortion could have alleviated the additional strain that the pregnancy placed on her heart. (Mueller did not respond to requests for comment.)

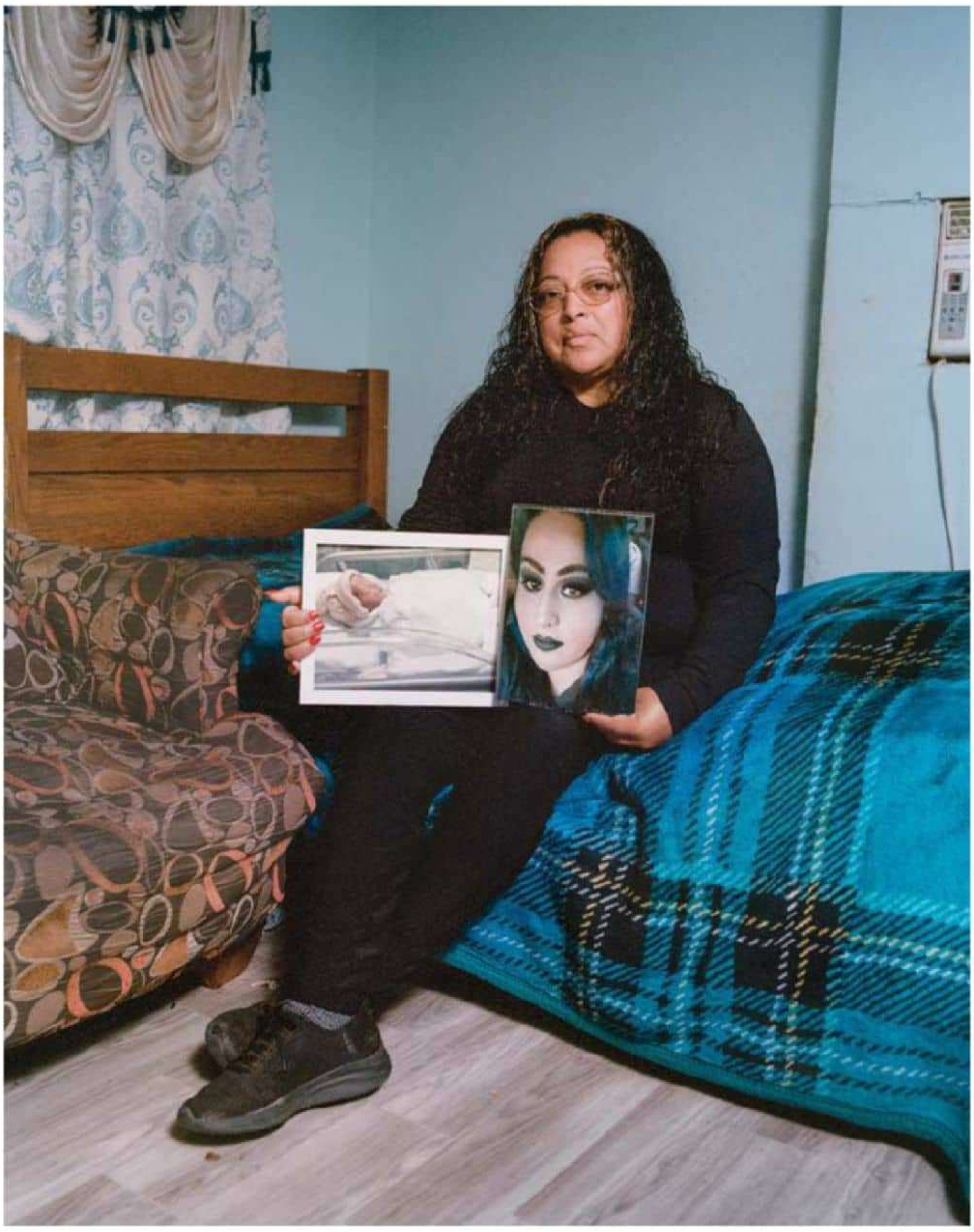
Deciding whether to end a much wanted pregnancy because of serious health risks is an excruciating process for many women, and it is also difficult terrain for doctors. Informed consent is a fundamental principle of medicine—a patient can basically do what she chooses with her body, and can take or leave medical advice, but doctors are ethically bound to give the patient enough information to grasp the possible costs and benefits of her choices. In states with abortion bans, which emphasize the rights of the unborn and tend to have the poorest maternal-health outcomes, a doctor's advice to a pregnant woman can be especially fraught.

Two weeks before Yeni saw Mueller, Lorie Harper, the director of maternal-fetal medicine at the University of Texas at Austin, who practices at Ascension Seton, had told colleagues at a conference how S.B. 8 was affecting her work: "Some women just cannot take the stress of pregnancy, so they may basically die or develop a life-threatening condition. In those cases, I have to recommend an abortion in order to prevent a maternal death. And that is getting much harder." She added, "Physicians are having to choose between their own personal well-being and, at times, a patient's well-being."

Another doctor in the Ascension Seton system told me, "One of the great challenges and rewarding features of obstetrics is that you have two patients. They sometimes have competing interests, and one is dependent on the other. Your job is to get both through the pregnancy safely, but that's not always possible. And it's very frustrating to have your hands tied because the patient who you need to save is not the one that's protected by law."

Yeni's first visit to Mueller was followed by five more. By the third visit,

"It would be worth ten times that with legs."



Yeni's mother, Leticia, relied on her daughter to help care for the rest of the family.

she was taking her medications as prescribed, but she had missed a virtual appointment with a maternal-fetal specialist because the house where her client lived had terrible cell-phone service. Mueller's notes catalogued what doctors call social determinants of health—structural factors that shape a person's welfare, beyond her individual choices or treatments. "Unable to get lantus rx bc was $400," Mueller wrote, of Yeni's prescription for long-acting insulin. "BP elevated today, was 20 min late for appt so was stressed about this." On Yeni's sixth visit, her blood pressure was normal. She had asked Mueller to write down her baby's sex on a piece of paper. The unopened note was passed to a florist, who prepared a box of balloons. In mid-April, a small crowd assembled in Leticia's back yard chanting, "*Cinco, cuatro, tres, dos, uno*," at which point pink balloons rose into the sky. It was a girl, for whom Yeni and Andrew had already chosen a name: Selene.

Three weeks later, in the early hours of May 9th, Andrew Willis, a doctor at the Luling E.R., was halfway through his shift when Yeni arrived with her husband. She had woken in the middle of the night, struggling to breathe. For about a month, she had been coughing persistently and gasping for air, especially when lying down, but now she could feel her heart racing as her oxygen levels dropped. She couldn't walk without becoming short of breath. Her blood pressure was dangerously high: 205/129. She was twenty-two weeks and six days pregnant.

Willis's instinct was to transfer Yeni to a facility in Kyle or Austin which was credentialled to treat high-risk-pregnancy cases. But her vitals had to be stabilized first. With a nasal cannula, he brought up her oxygen levels. Her blood pressure, though, wasn't responding to treatment: it dropped to 175/108, went back up to 219/126, then soared to 233/133. An X-ray revealed that Yeni had once again developed pulmonary edema. The longer she stayed in Luling, the greater the danger.

The hospital called a helicopter, but bad weather set in. Yeni would have to go by ambulance to a bigger hospital. An ob-gyn in Kyle advised Willis not to transfer Yeni there. Instead, she would be sent to the Ascension Seton Medical Center Austin, twenty miles farther away. In the paperwork, hypertension and pulmonary edema were listed as reasons for the transfer, along with suspected preeclampsia, a complication of pregnancy that is characterized by high blood pressure and can damage organs. Doctors often recommend that preeclamptic women deliver early.

Shortly after eight in the morning, an ambulance was whisking Yeni to the Austin hospital—*el grande*, as Yeni described it to her mother. The breathing difficulty was making her panic, as it had in the past—this was the third time she'd been given a diagnosis of pulmonary edema. She messaged Andrew:

"I'm alone and scared."

"Where is my mom."

Leticia was also terrified. That morning, she had rushed to the Luling E.R., and, as she'd watched the ambulance doors close, it had occurred to her that her daughter might die inside the vehicle—Yeni had never looked so sick. On arrival in Austin, records show, Yeni was at "high risk for clinical decompensation/death."

Yeni's fetus, at nearly twenty-three weeks, was on the cusp of viability. According to a 2022 study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, a baby delivered at twenty-three weeks has a less-than-fifty-per-cent chance of survival, and a significant number of the babies who do survive have severe disabilities. When considering an early delivery, a doctor must carefully weigh the benefit to the mother against the cost to the fetus. A second, more controversial approach in cases like Yeni's is a late-term abortion. In 2021, according to data obtained by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, less than one per cent of abortions occurred at or after twenty-one weeks. When an abortion is performed at this stage of pregnancy, it is often to protect the life of the mother.

Yeni was so unwell on admission—"stupid sick," in the words of one person involved in her care—that she was immediately transferred to the intensive-care unit and placed on assisted breathing. Though she was unable to speak, she could still text. "I want to live," she told Andrew, distressed. A little later, she tried to collect herself. When Leticia asked how she was feeling she replied, "Fine," adding a thumbs-up emoji.

Leticia recognized her daughter's habit of downplaying fears. How many dozens of messages had she received over the years that said "I love you mom and everything will be O.K."? So she persisted: "*Gorda*, tell me the truth." Yeni let this message go unanswered.

In the following days, under the care of Celeste Sheppard, a specialist in maternal-fetal medicine, and others, Yeni's pulmonary edema improved with blood-pressure medications. Her supplemental oxygen was dialled back, and tests showed that she most likely didn't have preeclampsia. It was a moment of seeming stability, in which medical professionals might have started a conversation with Yeni about the progressive burden that the pregnancy placed on her already vulnerable heart and lungs, and about the risks that continuing it might pose to her life. This didn't happen. Four days after admission, Yeni was discharged with an adjusted dose of hypertension medication and a potent diuretic. (Sheppard declined to answer questions about Yeni's care.)

When Yeni returned to Luling, exhausted, her family wondered if she would have been kept in the hospital longer had she been insured. (Some ob-gyns I spoke with also raised this question.) Leticia urged her to quit her job and stay home until Selene was born. But Yeni needed the money. How else would Selene's needs be covered? "I'm fine," she insisted. Leticia, though, could hear how Yeni dragged her feet when she came home from work. Was this normal for the fifth month of pregnancy? Although there were fewer than ten steps between where Yeni parked her car and the stoop, the journey left her spent. She started departing family gatherings before everyone else, including the elders. ("Where are you going, *mija*?") Even employees at the local supermarket, who had come to know Yeni over the years as a lively customer, had started worrying about her pallor.

In late May, Yeni texted Tuesday Coe, the nurse who cared for her quadriplegic client at night, saying that the shortness of breath had returned. She went to see Mueller, the ob-gyn in Kyle, and was asked to return the following day with a urine sample, which would be tested for excess protein, a sign of preeclampsia. When Yeni got back from the appointment, she felt defeated. She told Coe that she knew something was wrong but the doctors didn't seem to be getting to the bottom of it. "It was always the same thing, that they couldn't find anything," Coe told me. "And every time she had to go, it was so expensive, because she had no insurance, so she stopped going." Yeni's breathing problems continued, but records indicate that she did not visit the ob-gyn again.

Just after 5 A.M. on July 10th, Yeni's chronic symptoms intensified. A city ambulance arrived, and paramedics found her sitting on the side of her bed, feeling weak. She told them she was anxious, and they found that her blood pressure was perilously high—213/146. Andrew said that she was taking only half the blood-pressure medication she'd been prescribed. Yeni explained that her dose was always changing.

Yeni's oxygen levels were falling, and the paramedics concluded that she needed to go to the hospital. She took twenty minutes to get dressed, and when she finally left the house she stumbled before recovering her footing and making it to a stretcher inside the ambulance. She needed to catch her breath, she said; then her breathing turned into a cough. The paramedics put her on oxygen and started her on an I.V. You'll be going to Kyle via helicopter, they told her—she was too far along into her pregnancy, and too hypertensive, to admit to the Luling hospital.

Acute pulmonary edema often causes patients to panic, and, before the driver could start the engine, Yeni unfastened her safety belts—she couldn't breathe, she said. The paramedics struggled to calm her down. According to three medical professionals familiar with Yeni's case, it is appropriate in such situations to provide a hypertension medicine, like Labetalol, immediately. Instead, the paramedics interpreted some of her symptoms as signs of anxiety.

Andrew Willis, the Luling E.R. doctor, recommended sedation when they called him. They gave Yeni the first of two milligrams of Ativan, medical records show, and then a hundred micrograms of fentanyl. Labetalol was among the last medications administered.

By this time, neighbors had joined a distraught Andrew outside the ambulance, and were wondering why paramedics called to rush Yeni to a hospital five minutes away had been parked for almost two hours. (The director of Luling Emergency Medical Services, Richard Slaughter, did not respond to questions about the medications Yeni received or about the delayed departure; Willis did not respond to requests for comment.)

Minutes after 7 A.M., when the paramedics finally pulled up to the E.R., the helicopter meant to transport Yeni was still en route, but Willis and a small team were waiting at one of the hospital doors. They had I.V. bags of magnesium sulfate, which helps prevent seizures in preeclamptic women, and medications that would lower Yeni's blood pressure. When the ambulance stopped, though, the paramedics didn't get out. The hospital workers looked at one another. Finally, one of them flung open the vehicle's doors—Yeni had no pulse.

The paramedics had been giving her CPR. Willis took over, and with each compression a doctor trained in emergency medicine was making one of the most difficult calculations in the field of obstetrics: when to turn from working on a mother to working on her baby. The consensus among specialists is that initiating a C-section within roughly four minutes of the mother's death improves the infant's chances of survival; delivering the baby also improves chances of resuscitating the mother. Willis worked on Yeni past the four-minute mark, then made an incision in her abdomen. When Selene, now thirty-one weeks, came to rest on the old baby warmer, she, too, was dead.

After Andrew Glick, who had been in the waiting room, heard that Yeni and the baby were gone, he fled the E.R. Not long afterward, he left Luling for good in his wife's old car, where he'd kept one of her last cans of soda in the cup holder. Although he declined through family members to speak to me, he decided to share, via e-mail, a single document: Yeni's autopsy report.

CAUSE OF DEATH
Hypertensive cardiovascular disease associated with morbid obesity

> OTHER CONTRIBUTING FACTORS
> Pregnancy

The autopsy capped more than three thousand pages of medical records chronicling the short life of Yeniifer Alvarez-Estrada Glick. None of the records from when Yeni was alive acknowledge that, given her multiple underlying conditions, an abortion would have increased her chances of survival. Only the autopsy put it plainly. "Pregnancy creates stress on the heart and can exacerbate underlying heart disease and cause hypertensive crises," the medical examiner wrote, in naming pregnancy as a factor in Yeni's death.

Yeni's passing came as a shock to her family. "We were scheduled to do her baby shower that weekend," Andrew's sister Lisa Bozeman told me. "But we weren't having a baby shower. We were having a funeral." Ever since Yeni's death, some of the medical professionals involved in and briefed about her care have been haunted by the question of whether sins of omission were committed. They have asked themselves if responsibility for her death resided in part with the new laws that suppress free discussion—both among doctors and with patients—about therapeutic abortion. Had fear of legal repercussions trumped compassionate care?

Yeni's death occurred two weeks after the overturning of Roe, which triggered abortion restrictions in states across the country. In Idaho, Texas, and Missouri, for instance, performing an abortion in almost all circumstances became classified as a felony for which a doctor could face years in prison and the loss of a medical license. Even before the Supreme Court ruling, the U.S. (the rare wealthy nation without universal health care) was one of the few countries where maternal deaths had increased significantly in the past two decades. A study by the University of Colorado Boulder predicted a surge in maternal deaths after Roe fell, disproportionately among women of color; analysts at *The Lancet* and Harvard Medical School voiced similar worries.

The task of determining whether that prediction has come to pass in Texas belongs to the state's Maternal Mortality and Morbidity Review Committee. Texas's maternal-death rate has more than doubled since 1999, driven by the increase in maternal-care deserts and by a lack of prenatal care, of health insurance, and of access to contraception. The review committee has, for the past decade, attempted to conduct close analyses of these deaths, drawing on medical records, police reports, and other documentation. Its reports serve both as road maps for averting future deaths (the vast majority of the examined deaths were likely preventable, the committee's latest findings

THE REAL-FEEL™ GUY
BERNSTEIN

"Thirty-two? Feels more like twenty-nine to me. Yeah, I'd say twenty-nine."

show) and as social indictments, underscoring how much a woman's race, economic status, and location factor into her likelihood of dying while pregnant. Members of the committee told me that the review process is cumbersome, and that they won't start assessing 2022 cases until later this year, at the earliest.

Given that procedural lag time, *The New Yorker* asked four outside experts to review Yeni's medical file, which her mother obtained. All four said that Yeni's death was preventable; that she'd been discharged prematurely from the Austin hospital; and that a therapeutic abortion, if offered and accepted, would probably have saved her life.

Joanne Stone, the chair of the ob-gyn department at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai and the former president of the Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine, said flatly, "If she weren't pregnant, she likely wouldn't be dead." When Yeni was well enough to be moved out of the I.C.U. in Austin, Stone went on, "the discussion would be, 'Do you want to continue this pregnancy now, knowing that, because you already had the severe-range blood pressure and pulmonary edema, your likelihood of getting really sick is super-high?'" In such cases, she explained, "you have a consultation, you have the neonatologists come talk to her, you have the maternal-fetal-medicine specialists come talk to her, and then sometimes the patient needs a day or two to come to a decision. But in the legal landscape of Texas you can't even start that discussion."

Thomas Traill, the director of the E. Cowles Andrus Cardiac Clinic, at Johns Hopkins, and an expert in pregnancies of women with cardiac conditions, agreed with Stone about the gravity of Yeni's risk. He told me that, had Yeni had access to proper care for her serious underlying conditions, she would have been advised not to get pregnant in the first place, and that when she saw an ob-gyn ten weeks after she conceived an abortion should have been discussed. He contended that, with the law apparently stifling such a conversation, E.R. doctors and paramedics were placed in an "impossible situation" that ended in "a very preventable maternal death."

Charles E. Brown, a maternal-fetal expert who used to work at Ascension Seton in Austin, noted that Yeni's problems were heightened by the inconsistency with which she took her hypertension medications. However, he concurred with the other experts that the threat to her life was sufficiently high that at ten weeks along she should have been asked, "Do you want to continue this pregnancy?" Brown also said that, in Austin, Yeni should have been carefully monitored until a viable delivery was likely, instead of being discharged into a care desert. He considers her death a consequence of both S.B. 8 and a crisis long predating it: Texas's inadequate funding of the medical needs of the poor.

To Tony Ogburn, an ob-gyn who has spent his career serving women of color in low-income communities, most recently as chair of the department of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, "Yeni was a ticking time bomb—one that exploded." He acknowledged that some people would say she was noncompliant—"that this is her fault." But, he noted, if that's the attitude Americans have, the United States will never fix its maternal-mortality problem. Among the aspects of Yeni's case that particularly troubled him were the breaches of informed consent and shared decision-making. If Yeni had been made fully aware that she might die at twenty-seven, and had learned how an abortion might increase her chances of survival, and *then* had chosen to continue the pregnancy, Ogburn said, that would be O.K. Instead, she and her family had seemingly been denied crucial medical information that they had a right to know.

A spokesperson for Ascension Seton declined to answer specific questions about Yeni's care and any role that Texas's abortion restrictions might have played in it. (The spokesperson cited legal reasons and the right to privacy, although Yeni's mother had signed a waiver of privacy rights in order to allow the hospital to respond to my questions.) "We are committed to providing high-quality care to all individuals," the spokesperson said, "with special attention to the poor and vulnerable."

On a recent morning, when I joined Leticia and her sister Elizabeth at a diner in downtown Luling, the women gestured uneasily toward the booth behind us: four paramedics in uniform eating breakfast tacos, their radios hanging off their belts. In a community of only five thousand people, it is difficult to ask questions about the choices made by institutions on which your own life might one day depend. So Yeni's family and friends talked quietly among themselves, wondering what Yeni would have chosen had she known how imperilled she was.

One of her closest friends, Dolores Favela, said, "She and Andrew were so young, and if given a choice they probably would have thought to themselves, We'll have so much time together, we can have a child later on." Leticia wasn't as sure, recalling something Yeni said in passing after her improvement in the Austin I.C.U.: that if a doctor had to choose between saving her or saving Selene, her daughter should come first. Leticia had responded, half in jest, "And who exactly is going to take care of Selene?" "Well, you, Mami!" Yeni said. "Me?" Leticia teased. "If you leave, you better take Selene with you!" Laughing, the women laid the subject to rest, never to discuss it again.

Now that both Yeni and Selene were gone, Leticia tried to find comfort in the idea that it had all been God's will. But what if it hadn't been? What if the catastrophe could have been prevented? She thought that Yeni would have pursued answers had such a thing happened to someone she loved. Leaving the diner, Leticia and Elizabeth headed to the cemetery, as they often did, to shoo the lizards from the grave, tidy the marigolds, and test the solar-powered lights that they'd draped over the tombstone to insure that Yeni and Selene would not be left in the dark. ♦

PROFILES

SHAMELESSLY DRAMATIC

In the plays of Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, ugly feelings find sophisticated forms.

BY JULIAN LUCAS

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins has endured his share of mortifying moments in his journey to the American stage. There was the night in his early twenties when he met Tony Kushner at a birthday party and stood for so long in awestruck silence, pretending to text, that Kushner pityingly encouraged him to have a good time. Or the day he misspelled "heifer" in a spelling bee, earning so much mockery from friends of his mother's, he told me, that "I almost had my race card taken away." Two of his first plays stumbled into scandals before they even opened, with one of them leaked to and subsequently eviscerated in the *Times*. But the cake-taking incident occurred during a brief flirtation with performance art, when Jacobs-Jenkins appeared before his family in blackface.

"My mom was there," he told me recently. "My kindergarten teacher was there. My brother and sister were there." He closed his eyes and laughed into his steepled hands. The happening was part of an experimental-art festival in his home town of Washington, D.C., and took place in a former bathroom at a shuttered school. His mother had caught word of it online, and by the time he recognized her voice among the dozen or so spectators it was too late to stop the show. Jacobs-Jenkins spent the next half hour performing mimelike routines face-to-face with each member of the audience, lip-synching as machines spewed fog and a sample from Beyoncé's "Crazy in Love" played on a loop: "Uh-oh, uh-oh, uh-oh, oh-no-no."

He remembers it as one of the moments that led him to choose playwriting over performance. Having recently graduated from a master's program at N.Y.U., Jacobs-Jenkins was attempting to excavate the legacy of stigma attached to Blackness onstage. He saw himself in the lineage of artists who explored the afterlife of racist imagery, and of avant-garde performers who dissected the construction of identity by defamiliarizing their own. Yet his brother laughed. His former teacher looked terrified. His mother never spoke of the day again. Only the principal of his Afrocentric elementary school—where he'd once appeared in a Black-history pageant as Martin Luther King, Jr.—managed to find words for the occasion. "First, I want to say we are so proud of you," she told Jacobs-Jenkins. Then she asked a question: "When will we see you on Broadway?"

The answer has finally arrived, with the recent opening of "Appropriate," at Second Stage's Hayes Theatre, on Forty-fourth Street. Directed by Lila Neugebauer, and marking the Broadway return of Sarah Paulson, it's a raucous family drama set at a former plantation in Arkansas, where the Lafayette siblings have gathered to divide their late father's estate. They find an album of lynching photos while cleaning out the house, and what follows is a feverish reckoning with sin, secrecy, and the dubious dream of suppressing an inappropriate past while continuing to appropriate its spoils. "You want me to go back in time and spank my great-great-grandparents?" one sibling says, raging against white guilt. "Or should I lynch myself?"

At a dress rehearsal, I watched from the mezzanine as Corey Stoll, in the role of Bo Lafayette, snarled these lines at Elle Fanning, who plays his brother's conscientious vegan fiancée, River. They faced off across an eloquently cluttered living room where a pressure cooker winked from the edge of the stage like Chekhov's gun. Scenes flew by in a whirl of abject dysfunction. Some family members are anxious to destroy the album, others to sell it as a collector's item, and still others to concoct an excuse for its damning presence in the home. A surly teen grandchild might even be masturbating to the ghastly heirloom—or at least so it seems to his uncle, a reformed alcoholic pedophile determined to make amends. Presiding over the circus is Paulson in the role of Toni Lafayette, an embattled and embittered matriarch committed to defending her father's good name. "Enjoy forgiving each other," she seethed at her siblings in one mike-drop exit. "I hope you forgive each other all night long!"

I caught up with Jacobs-Jenkins afterward in the lobby, where he fielded compliments from members of the audience. "This could be my family," an older white man volunteered, adding that his grandfather had been a "racist piece of shit." "Oh, *cool!*" Jacobs-Jenkins replied. A woman in red said that she was still processing the show. "You are?" he responded. "I like that. It makes me feel good." Jacobs-Jenkins is a soft-featured man with watchful eyes, restless fingers, and a chinstrap beard that would flatter a top hat. (That night, he wore a black beanie.) He speaks at lightning speed in a densely allusive dialect of High Millennial, chasing its customary hyperbole—"incredible," "hilarious," "obsessed," "psychotic"—with drafts of irony and singsong warmth. You can never quite tell whether he's making fun of himself or other people, bless their hearts. "Man, I'm finally a tourist trap," he mused as a few stragglers filed out. "I was passing people going to 'Spamalot,' and I was, like, 'Oh, this is *different!*'"

The production is perhaps more of a belated achievement for Broadway than it is for Jacobs-Jenkins. At thirty-nine, the playwright can boast of two Pulitzer nominations, a MacArthur Fellowship, and a cultural presence that extends from Hollywood writers' rooms to college syllabi. Not long ago, he created an FX miniseries based on Octavia Butler's "Kindred," and also joined the Theatre and Performance Studies program at Yale. Why should he be

The dramatist can boast of two Pulitzer nominations, a MacArthur, and a cultural presence from TV screens to syllabi.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MACIEK JASIK

bowled over to have reached, in his words, "a little postage stamp of the country owned by three landlords," where, before becoming a Tony voter, he rarely attended shows because he couldn't afford tickets? "I see all these sweet little notes from people that are, like, 'Finally, Branden's on Broadway!'" he told me on another occasion, insisting that, despite a "strange pressure to be so excited," he felt no particular thrill. Nevertheless, he admitted that it was fascinating to see "Appropriate"—which he wrote more than ten years ago, as a wry homage to the white family drama—realized so grandly on the Great White Way: "In some ways I'm, like, What am I about to reëncounter?"

Jacobs-Jenkins has made an art of dramatizing the Chinese finger trap that is "writing about race." (Say you aren't doing it and the snare only tightens.) In his breakout work, "An Octoroon" (2014), a frustrated Black playwright revives an antebellum melodrama as a riposte to the expectation that his work report on contemporary race relations. Race, as Jacobs-Jenkins has memorably put it, is "the biggest, longest-running theater game in the history of mankind." But it's also just a subcategory of his deeper engagement with shame, and the ways it forces people to confront the selves and the stories that others foist upon them like dunce caps. He has described theatre as a space for ugly feelings, and in his plays ugly feelings find sophisticated forms. "I think of Branden as a David in search of his Goliaths," the director Eric Ting told me. "Each play is about finding a new Goliath."

There's a generational valence to his fixation on the embarrassment of living—a millennial complaint about the awkwardness of having been groomed for plum roles in an end-of-history pageant that never came to be. In "Gloria" (2015), set at a magazine whose young staffers blame "post-war glutton babies" for squandering their futures, a copy editor feels so disgraced by the low attendance at her housewarming party that she shoots up the office. "Girls" (2019), an adaptation of "The Bacchae," reimagines Euripides' uptight king as an incel streamer maddened by his parents' boomerish decadence. Jacobs-Jenkins's keen ear for the anxieties of our age is equally attuned to those of ages gone by; in adaptations like "An Octoroon" and "Everybody" (2017), based on a medieval morality play, the shock of self-consciousness summons the ghosts of theatre's history. "I cringe at my past," he joked in one of our conversations. Yet what is cringe but the beginning of self-knowledge?

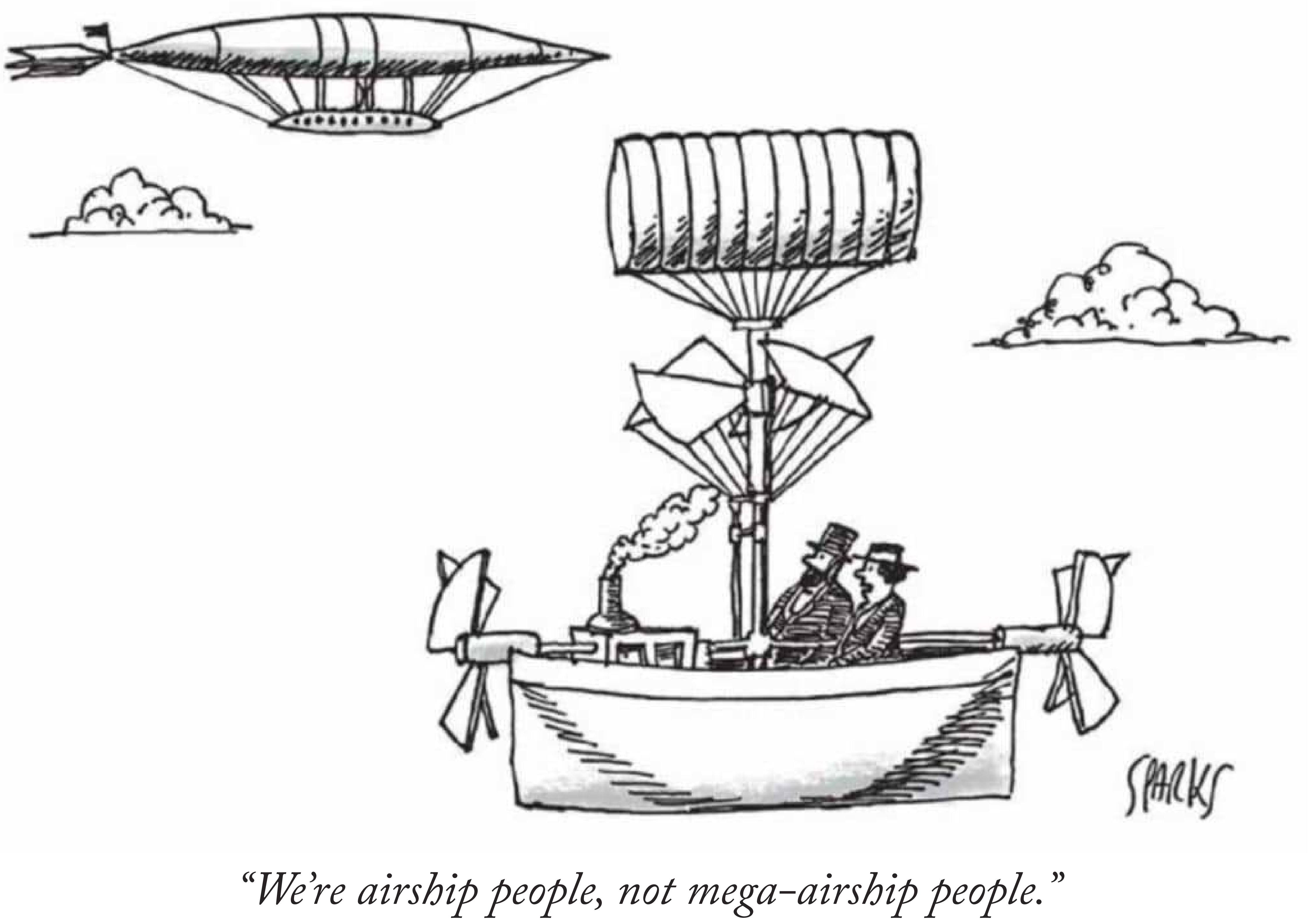
In early November, I accompanied Jacobs-Jenkins to an early rehearsal of "Appropriate," at the Tony Kiser Theatre, on Forty-third Street. "We talked about shaming you," Neugebauer told him. (We'd arrived in the middle of a scene.) A longtime friend and collaborator of the playwright, she met him at the 2013 Humana Festival of New American Plays, in Louisville, Kentucky, where "Appropriate" premièred. Neugebauer was immediately taken with the work and its author. "Branden is interested in what we learn about ourselves when we find ourselves in a moment of very specifically calibrated discomfort," she'd told me. Their professional chemistry, which Jacobs-Jenkins characterizes as "impish," was obvious. But that day Neugebauer was all business, bunching up the sleeve ends of her sweater in her fists as she hashed out scenes.

New pages were eagerly awaited in the rehearsal room, where actors lounged by a humidifier and the windows looked out on the aggressive red signage of a Chick-fil-A. This is Jacobs-Jenkins's seventh production of "Appropriate," but you'd hardly have known it from the intensity of his revisions. He tweaked line after line on his rose-gold MacBook Air, which shared a tabletop with his formidable arsenal of fountain pens. "I'm obviously an incredible typer," Jacobs-Jenkins apologized. "You and Donna Tartt," Sarah Paulson, in a baggy sweater and paint-flecked jeans, replied. (Tartt, a famously meticulous reviser, publishes roughly one novel per decade.)

"Do you want to explain the latest changes?" Neugebauer asked, once he was done.

"I'm trying to thin out some of the legalese," he replied. Nearly half the text on his screen was red.

For Jacobs-Jenkins, a play is never finished, because theatre is alive. Observing both actors and audiences, he constantly alters his work, often right up to and beyond the deadline. Perhaps the furthest he's ever pushed it was with "The Comeuppance" (2023), the story of a group of thirtysomethings who face down shadows of their former selves at a pandemic-haunted high-school reunion. The play culminates with a monologue about survivor's guilt by the character-hopping spirit of Death. "Literally, it was Death revealing who Death had come for," Ting, who directed the play's première, told me. Yet Jacobs-Jenkins didn't finish the monologue—or even announce who would be delivering it—until the day of the "third or fourth preview," Ting recalled. Nobody complained, he went on, because those in the rehearsal room understood it as an opportunity to mirror the audience's experience. Jacobs-Jenkins



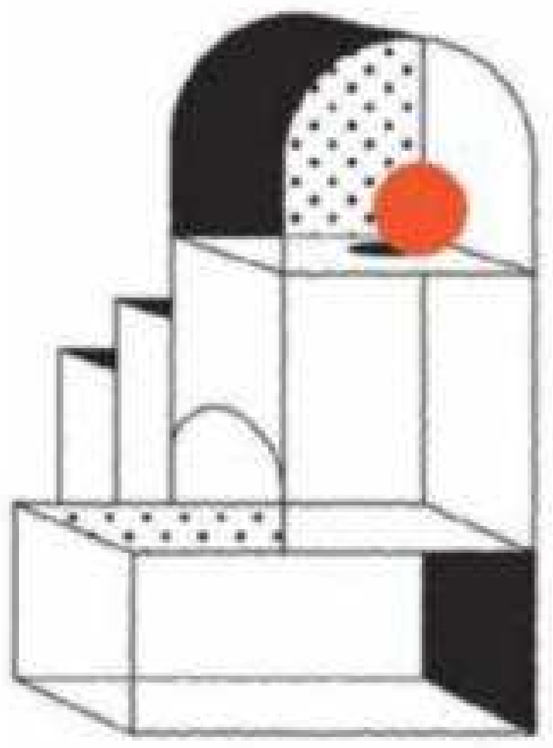
"We're airship people, not mega-airship people."

never treats his plays like "a painting that he has signed his name to," Ting said. "If you're going to invite him back into the rehearsal hall with a script, he is going to resurrect it."

"My second 'Oh, my God' is gone," Paulson remarked as she read the new text. She boiled water for tea in a sleek but slow kettle, lamenting that attractive things aren't necessarily efficient. Jacobs-Jenkins teased that the pot shouldn't call the kettle black. "Hardy, hardy, hardy, hardy!" Paulson fake-laughed in his face. The two volleyed jokes all morning. She later told me that the playwright was sillier than she'd expected, and mentioned that she'd been delighted to discover that they both knew all the lyrics to "A Chorus Line." The "musicality" of the writing in "Appropriate" had stunned her, she said, and she confessed that she was excited for a role in which "desirability was not on the table at all." Paulson said in an appearance on "The View" that two TV shows informed her interpretation of Toni—"Chimp Empire" and "The Real Housewives of Salt Lake City"—but on Broadway she once played Laura Wingfield in Tennessee Williams's "The Glass Menagerie."

"Appropriate" rose like Frankenstein's monster from a dissection of dramas like Williams's. In 2011, Jacobs-Jenkins noticed the contrasting reception that met two Broadway shows about dysfunctional families: Tracy Letts's "August: Osage County," which won hosannas for delivering the familiar satisfactions of the genre, and Lydia Diamond's "Stick Fly," about a Black family on Martha's Vineyard, which was dinged for lacking an original statement on race. Why couldn't a Black playwright's work be appreciated simply for its mastery of the domestic fracas? And what about the racial subtext in Letts's work, not to mention in plays by Williams, Sam Shepard, and Eugene O'Neill? Jacobs-Jenkins launched into a mashup of favorite tropes from this canon, collecting them in a Word document and proceeding to "sand it down and sand it down" until something new emerged.

"I was fully ready to just be a playwright who was read," Jacobs-Jenkins told me, a decision that he attributed to the "plucky puckishness" of youth. His models were Adrian Piper, the conceptual artist who "retired" from Blackness; Adrienne Kennedy, who wrote "Funnyhouse of a Negro," a fuguelike allegory about self-loathing; and, especially, Kerry James Marshall, whose triptych "Heirlooms & Accessories" inspired Jacobs-Jenkins to write a play that would make Blackness invisible but spectrally present. The art work depicts black-and-white photos of young white women in bejewelled lockets. They look like innocuous snapshots from a family album, but turn out to be faces in the crowd at a lynching—a revelation that "Appropriate" reproduces onstage.



About halfway through the rehearsal, Elle Fanning arrived with a cup of matcha. Getting into character as River, she made "quinoaffles," cleansed the air with sage, and gracefully snatched the album in a moment worthy of the basketball court. The actress is best known for her role as a teen empress in the TV series "The Great," and in "Appropriate," too, she portrays an underestimated ingénue. River is usually played for laughs, but she's also the only character who responds to the narrative's awful disclosures with apposite gravity. "I didn't want her to be taken as a joke," Fanning told me, and her approach inspired Jacobs-Jenkins to write her lyrical new lines about home and the passage of time. ("It's really keeping me on my toes, but I think he's learning about us," she said of the actor-specific rewrites. "You know, this is his Broadway début, so he wants it to be perfect.") The new text foreshadows an elaborate scenic epilogue. "Nature takes the house back," Neugebauer told me, explaining that an image of a tree growing up through a house had come to her—"I hate when people say this"—in a dream.

During lunch, Jacobs-Jenkins told me about the roots that he's been putting down. Five years ago, he married the actor and cabaret artist Cheo Bourne, whom he met by chance at a performance of "Bootycandy"—a Black gay coming-of-age comedy by the playwright Robert O'Hara—after resisting a mutual friend's efforts to set them up on a date. Now they live in Prospect Heights and have a three-year-old daughter, Indigo, a Jacobs-Jenkins lookalike who enjoys sitting on his lap and playing with binder clips as he writes. Recently, they took her on a trip to Japan, where, although they stayed near a famous Kabuki theatre, the only drama they saw was at KidZania Tokyo, a sprawling miniature city where children work "jobs" for fake money. Jacobs-Jenkins showed me a video of Indigo singing on the balcony of a clock tower, which, alas, didn't earn her enough for a toy that she wanted.

Neither did Jacobs-Jenkins escape disappointment. He couldn't find an interpreter in time to tour a paper factory in Kanazawa, which he'd sought out as part of a family quest. Like the Lafayettes, his people come from Arkansas—specifically, Camden, where his maternal grandfather spent most of his life working at a paper mill. He sent boxes of notebooks every year, a memory that returned to Jacobs-Jenkins when, early in the pandemic, he developed a passion for stationery. "I'd call my mother up, as you do," he recounted, "and was, like, 'Talk me through what this is about. I want to hear the symbolic, I want to get Geertzian about this. Give me some thick description'"—an allusion to the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. His mother explained that the gifts stemmed from her father's pride that the family could read and write, no small achievement for a man with little formal schooling. Jacobs-Jenkins sees a "deep irony in the fact that he participated in the making of the thing that I sully."

There might be a play in the story, he thinks, though he's been repeatedly stymied in researching it. A few years ago, during a road trip to Austin with his husband, Jacobs-Jenkins insisted on stopping in Camden to see his grandfather's old house. But the property was so overgrown that their sedan couldn't make it up the driveway, as though nature were guarding the family's secrets.

"I always get super jealous of writers who are, like, 'I grew up listening to stories around my grandmama's table. . . . I came from a family of storytellers,'" Jacobs-Jenkins told me, because his own family was full of "so much crazy mystery." When he was thirteen, his father, believing that he was dying, revealed that he had three other children. (He is still alive.) One of the playwright's great-grandmothers abandoned her husband and children at the behest of a talking spider, which she saw at a bar in the midst of a nervous breakdown. "I'm still compensating for this absence of sharing," Jacobs-Jenkins told me—for a failure to "overcome how shame worked."

Jacobs-Jenkins was born in 1984 and grew up in Takoma, a racially mixed neighborhood in Washington, D.C. His mother, Patricia Jacobs, was a graduate of Harvard Law School who ran a microfilm company, and was once profiled in *Black Enterprise*. His father, Benjamin Jenkins, was a prison dentist. The two met at an auction for "Black memorabilia" from the Jim Crow era, which cluttered the house where Jacobs raised their son and his two adopted siblings. (Jenkins often visited but never lived with the family.) In many ways, Jacobs-Jenkins's childhood was typical: Legos, "Goosebumps," Nickelodeon, and, eventually, MTV. But there were also vintage "Whites Only" and "Colored Only" signs above the entrance to the dining room. Cast-iron mammies held doors open, and their spectres chased the future playwright through his dreams. Far from causing trauma, he maintains, growing up in this Betye Saar diorama prepared him to think detachedly about race and artifice in his work.

He attended school at the Roots Activity Learning Center, where the all-Black literature curriculum featured work by Toni Cade Bambara and August Wilson. His summers were spent in Arkansas with his maternal grandmother, Helen Jacobs, a schoolteacher and an amateur dramatist whom, as Jacobs-Jenkins told me, "everyone kind of blames for what I do." She cast him as the Easter Bunny in a show at her local church, and also took him to his first theatrical performance. "I guess it was some kind of Passion play," he recalled, speculating that she may have been spying on the competition. "The end was, like, Jesus ascending on this trash-bag-wrapped platform." He wondered if the man was really Christ, and a lifelong fascination with the mechanics of theatrical illusion was born.

His first onstage triumphs were at spelling bees. Jacobs-Jenkins began participating in fourth grade, devoting so much energy to the pursuit that his mother worried about the impact on his psyche. "I didn't have a coach or anything," he told me. "I was, like, a ten-year-old going HAM." At thirteen, he reached the finals of the Scripps National Spelling Bee, dispatching "beneficent," "inaugural," "apiculture," and "quasquicentennial" before succumbing to "pinyin." (He could have passed by spelling its homonym "pinion," if only he hadn't asked for a definition.) Glorious as it was, the all-consuming extracurricular left him with subpar math scores on high-school entrance tests. He eventually got into St. John's College High School, where he felt socially overwhelmed before embracing two passions: fiction and theatre.

"Nancy Drew" entered his life during a summer without cable in Arkansas, where he stayed with his grandfather after his grandmother's death. "I would rip through them because I had nothing to do all day," Jacobs-Jenkins said of the series, an introduction to genre fiction that was also, appealingly, "a little queer." He developed an obsession with short fiction through Ray Bradbury and J. D. Salinger. Soon, he was devouring back issues of *The New Yorker*, which he purchased at D.C.'s main library for a dime apiece. Jacobs-Jenkins was so taken with Zadie Smith's story "Stuart" that he swiped a recording of her reading it with the file-sharing program Napster, which most of his peers used for music piracy.

And then there was drama. Envy of a friend who appeared in a professional production of "Waiting for Godot," along with the encouragement of a camp counsellor who noticed his aptitude for performance, morphed, by high school, into full-blown theatre-kid syndrome. Musicals were his entrée into the his-

THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

What would it be like to be a mantis shrimp,
poorly understood, territorial, combative,

with part of your brain housed
in each eyestalk?

I don't think it's exactly love, but some species
are monogamous, sharing a patch of sea grass

or underwater burrow for twenty years.
My place is probably a hundred and fifty feet

above sea level, and when my son comes back home
he sleeps in a captain's bed above his old T-shirts.

Sometimes he brings his dog,
a rescue, and calls me Dogma,

then they're gone again
and I rattle around again, mindlessly,

listening to my neighbor sing.
From the far end of the galley kitchen

I can watch the Hudson tides rise and fall,
can imagine being dredged in a net

dropped by the sloop my son and his classmates
sailed, long ago, when they were still children.

I remember looking out the window then, too,
watching the Clearwater

make its leisurely way up and back.
Was my mind already housed here in my eyes,

which, like all human eyes, like to close—
to rest, dream, recall a face, a child's voice

who is no longer a child? Who knows
what else they're thinking about now.

True story about the mantis shrimp
who shattered her aquarium walls.

Because she was alone?
Or because she was not alone enough?

Stories I cannot tell because I don't know
how they end and might never understand.

Who would buy a mantis shrimp,
lifted from the sea grass,

sent by express mail to be dropped
into a thousand distant aquariums

where she swivels her compound eyes
and takes everything in.

—*Catherine Barnett*

tory of American drama, especially Kander and Ebb's "Chicago," a production of which he directed. His friend Mary Wiseman, who later appeared in "An Octoroon," played Roxie Hart, and nostalgically described the production as "way too sexy for a youth theatre." She and Jacobs-Jenkins had met at an acting camp in their teens. Wiseman remembers him as a skinny kid in ultra-wide JNCO jeans who used big words and traded jokes with her on AIM. "He was really, really funny," she told me, with a penchant for "elaborate setups and pretty underwhelming payoffs."

In 2002, Jacobs-Jenkins arrived at Princeton. He threw himself into fiction writing, taking workshops with Chang-rae Lee and Edmund White, but also directed and acted, often participating in multiple plays per semester. "He could sing, he could dance, he could act, he could philosophize," the director Lileana Blain-Cruz, a former classmate and perennial collaborator of Jacobs-Jenkins, recalled, describing him as a member of Princeton's "theatre illuminati." A scholar named Daphne Brooks changed his life with "The Drama of 'Blackness,'" a survey of African American theatre that taught him how performance and history were intertwined. He declared a major in anthropology, aspiring to reconstruct the social contexts of vanished performance traditions, and developing scholarly ambitions that vied with his literary dreams.

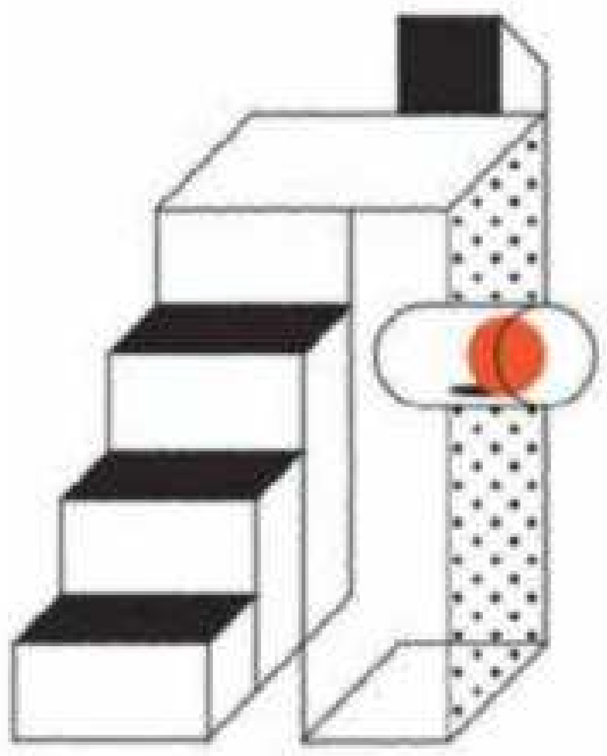
It was the playwright Bob Sandberg who convinced Jacobs-Jenkins that he was born to write for the stage. "I'd never had a student like Branden and really haven't since," he told me. Jacobs-Jenkins came to Sandberg's introductory playwriting class after souring on short-fiction workshops, where peers fixated on sussing out the race of his narrators. Drama's embodiment forced people to confront their assumptions about identity more directly, and he was fascinated by the use of archetypes in genres like commedia dell'arte. He ended up writing and directing a senior-thesis play that doubled as an anthropological history of race, genre, and American theatre. Blain-Cruz, who worked on sound for the production, remembers it as an early sign of his talent for endowing abstractions with visceral scenic life. At one point, a girl with cancer was visited by her lost hair, played by an actor in a full hair suit who danced a ballet. It was characteristic Jacobs-Jenkins, Blain-Cruz told me, a big theatrical gesture that interrupted "chaos and destruction" with a "tender, unexpected moment of surreal hope."

After college, Jacobs-Jenkins moved to New York, but didn't immediately pursue a career in drama. He began the master's program at N.Y.U., studying with the queer theorist and performance-studies scholar José Muñoz. He also took a job in the fiction department of *The New Yorker*, where he'd already spent two summers as an intern. "He'd been reading it since he was fourteen, and he remembered every story," Deborah Treisman, the fiction editor, told me. Jacobs-Jenkins assessed submissions, excerpted novels, and introduced the magazine's theatre critic Hilton Als to work by emerging playwrights such as Annie Baker, David Adjmi, and Young Jean Lee. (Als became a mentor.) His colleagues came to know a charming, sociable young man who was slightly neurotic but precociously assured in his tastes, and so polite that his madcap plays came as a surprise.

"Gloria" used his time at the magazine to devastating effect, evoking the desperation of competitive young editors reduced to kneecapping and humiliating one another for lack of promotional opportunities. They sneak peeks at their colleagues' manuscripts, sabotage their stories, and then, in the wake of the office shooting, bicker over who's entitled to write a best-seller about surviving it. As in so many plays by Jacobs-Jenkins, the cruel comedy alternates with moments of piercing introspection. "Why are we like this?" a fact checker cries in the midst of a deadline-induced breakdown. "What is a 'profile' actually doing besides throwing one human being after another to the wolves of history, rendering entire lives flat and uncomplicated and eight thousand words long?"

The global financial crisis provided the jolt that Jacobs-Jenkins needed to embrace his vocation. As publications shrank and shuttered, he made a pact with several other young staffers to plan their escapes: "We got drunk at a dinner party and were, like, 'Let's just apply for Fulbrights!'" His application to study in Berlin was accepted around the same time that the Public Theatre expressed interest in staging one of his plays. He deferred the fellowship, signed on for the production, and quit the job. Co-workers wished him well, but as an editor who knew him reminded me, "One does not expect one's junior colleague to overnight become the sensation of the New York theatre world."

Jacobs-Jenkins gets a lot of his writing done at the Park Avenue Armory, the nineteenth-century arsenal turned arts venue on the Upper East Side. His studio is tucked away on the second floor of the brick behemoth, and used to be the quarters for a company of National Guardsmen. In 2017, he moved into the space for a yearlong residency and was never asked to leave. Now he serves on the Armory's board, but his studio still has the allure of a secret hideout. On a visit last month, I followed Jacobs-Jenkins down a long hallway lined with portraits of military men. Then he opened the doors to a shadowy chamber where decorative swords hung over the wainscoting, sighing as he declared the room "the only joy in my life."



There was a red vinyl couch under a chandelier; in a fireplace, light bulbs glowed through tissue-paper flames. At the center of the room was a long writing table, but we continued past it and into a dusty closet crammed with statues and moldering taxidermy. While teaching at Hunter College, Jacobs-Jenkins would sometimes take his M.F.A. students to the space for a surprise. "We'd be working and I'd be, like, 'Guys, come on, let's see what's going on!'" he said, pulling back a curtain to reveal the building's three-hundred-foot-long drill hall. "And it'd be, you know, Nicki Minaj." (She attended a fashion show there.) Jacobs-Jenkins has been asked to dream up a commission, but still finds the hall's grandeur intimidating.

We settled back at the table. Desk lamps shone on a scattering of books, papers, and periodicals, including the latest *New York Review of Books;* Jacobs-Jenkins, who studied German, is working on an essay for the publication about the controversial Austrian Nobel laureate Peter Handke, whom he fondly compared to a "grandpa blogger." He has spent a lot of time studying the careers of his favorite writers. Toni Morrison, whose novels he reread in chronological order after her death, started late, he said, but after "Song of Solomon" it was "banger, banger, banger, banger, banger." Edward Albee suffered a mid-career slump after his acclaimed early plays, but recovered toward the end of his life. "The pleasure is being surprised by how the form comes toward you and goes away from you," Jacobs-Jenkins said, before wondering if he really meant it. "I'm talking like a teacher. Maybe I'm just trying to convince myself."

He aspires to write an "epic" like "The Crucible," a synthesis of the personal, historical, and allegorical that could be created only by someone whose creative muscles are "toned to fucking death." But teaching a seminar on Arthur Miller made him keenly aware of how fleeting such mastery could be. "He'd done his best work in the first two decades of his career, but he had no idea," Jacobs-Jenkins said. "You just don't know what's going to happen, and that always moves me." He prefers not to think about the shape of his own œuvre: "It's play by play, and ideally every play opens up a new door." I agreed that some things were best left to biographers and journalists. Jacobs-Jenkins laughed, then—taking advantage of the echoey acoustics—threw back his head and screamed. "I just saw the future," he said.

Recently, he's been putting the finishing touches on "Purpose," a family drama about a Black political dynasty that Phylicia Rashad will direct at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre in March. It's an autopsy of the civil-rights-era model of Black leadership, inspired by the end of the Obama era, the Marxist scholar Adolph Reed's critique of Jesse Jackson's 1984 Presidential campaign, and his own childhood in D.C., where his mother advised the Reagan Administration on supporting minority-owned businesses and mixed with members of the Congressional Black Caucus. Another forthcoming play, "Grass," is about a mother-son road trip to civil-rights museums, and pokes fun at Walt Whitman's deification in queer literary circles. Given Whitman's racist views, Jacobs-Jenkins explained, he was exasperated by "this notion of a white subject being, like, 'I am everything, I can be everything, I'm the slave, I'm the grass.'" He showed me a photo of himself and Carmelita Tropicana—a Cuban American performance artist who taught him at N.Y.U.—at a marathon reading of "Leaves of Grass" in their best Whitman drag.

"All of our students now are going into drag," he observed. "It's cheap, it's gig economy. You just bring yourself." He speculated that performance trends cycle generationally. When he came to New York, in 2006, everyone seemed to be founding a D.I.Y. theatre company. But he was drawn to the downtown performance artists of the eighties, who'd turned their own bodies into canvases. The mid-two-thousands were the days of the blackface incident, and another performance in which he nearly drained a goldfish bowl—with a goldfish in it—through a Krazy Straw while delivering a monologue about privilege. (The goldfish survived.) "All I knew is that I wanted to write and that what I was writing wasn't making sense," he said of his search for the right medium. To find his way back to theatre, he needed a way to exorcise himself.

"An Octoroon" was the first show I saw after moving to New York. A hallucinatory adaptation of the Irish-born playwright Dionysius (Dion) Boucicault's 1859 melodrama "The Octoroon," the play arrived at the beginning of a renaissance in reimagining the legacy of slavery. I remember seeing, in the span of just a few years, Kara Walker's enormous sugar sphinx, "A Subtlety," a monument to plantation workers, at the Domino Sugar Refinery, in Williamsburg; reading James McBride's "The Good Lord Bird," which won the 2013 National Book Award for fiction; and watching as a steamboat exploded at the climax of "An Octoroon," which Sarah Benson directed at SoHo Rep in 2014. A heavy wall crashed to the stage in an homage to Buster Keaton, propelling cotton balls into the audience. I took some of them home as keepsakes.

The moment was tailor-made for Jacobs-Jenkins, a student of nineteenth-century theatre with a preternatural sensitivity to contemporary neuroses about identity. His play began with BJJ, an author surrogate, stepping out in his underwear to deliver a jeremiad on playwriting while Black:

> I can't even wipe my ass without someone trying to accuse me of deconstructing the race problem in America. I even tried writing a play about talking farm animals once—just to avoid talking about people—and this artistic director was like, "Oh my god! You're totally deconstructing African folktales, aren't you?"

FARLEY KATZ

"My scientific opinion? That is one big-ass piece of bacon."

America demands a "conversation on race," in other words—and BJJ is going to give it to them. During the monologue, he puts on whiteface and self-administers a wedgie. Soon, a resurrected Boucicault joins him, enraged that he's been forgotten by a theatre-going public that his melodramas once held in thrall. Both playwrights assume multiple roles in a revival of "The Octoroon," a damsel-in-distress narrative about a mixed-race woman who discovers, when her late father's plantation goes bankrupt, that she is legally a slave. She becomes the object of a struggle between two white men: a gentleman who loves her despite her complexion, and a mustache-twirling ruffian who wants to buy her at auction, lustily declaring, "I'll own that octoroon!"

The play revels in the hall-of-mirrors absurdity involved in the performance of race. BJJ, expected to excavate his racial consciousness, responds with a work by an Irishman who used Blackness to dramatize the psychodramas of his white American audience. In one of the most memorably ludicrous scenes, the octoroon's two suitors engage in fisticuffs. Yet both men are played by BJJ, who staggers around receiving his own blows like a cartoon character. The punch line is that he couldn't find any white men willing to play slaveholders.

Melodrama is mocked but also earnestly resurrected, a testament to what Benson described to me as Jacobs-Jenkins's ability to "hold present, past, and future feelings in the same space." Perhaps the show's greatest surprise was that the artifice itself was moving: an infinite regress of characters confined by social scripts, from the octoroon tangled in the legal fictions of a slave society to the pigeonholed and misunderstood BJJ. New York audiences understood well enough. "There were lines down the block every night," Benson told me. The show won an Obie Award jointly with "Appropriate." "Some people are paralyzed by self-consciousness," Ben Brantley wrote in the *Times*. "Jacobs-Jenkins is inspired, energized and perhaps even set free by it."

"An Octoroon" was a triumph, but it originated with two humiliations. Jacobs-Jenkins's début play, "Neighbors," premièred at the Public Theatre in 2010. A continuation of his minstrelsy studies, it's a tale of warring families set in the suburbs. One exemplifies post-racial America—a Black professor, his white wife, and their biracial daughter—and the other is a troupe of caricatures in blackface. The play, which Jacobs-Jenkins wrote assuming that nobody would ever produce it, was wild as all get-out, with dreamlike interludes involving watermelons, enormous phalluses, and musical flatulence. The scenes were based on careful study of minstrelsy's erotic undercurrents, but this escaped many, if not all, of those who saw the production: Jacobs-Jenkins had aimed both over their heads and below their belts. The *Times* reported on a leaked script before the show opened, sent reporters to interview people who walked out, and published a pan that called it "overheated and undercooked." When Jacobs-Jenkins left for Berlin, it was as though he'd been run out of town.

He came back just a few months later for another rotisserie turn in the footlights. This time it was for an early version of "An Octoroon," at a storied avant-garde performance venue in the East Village then called P.S. 122. Jacobs-Jenkins had been drawn to Boucicault's idea that the sole purpose of drama was to create powerful catharsis, and loved the idea of playing with a highly convention-bound melodrama. But creative differences emerged between him and the director, Gavin Quinn. After a dispute, Quinn and several actors departed, leaving Jacobs-Jenkins in a directorial role. Then one of the leads, who played the octoroon's white paramour, characterized the show as a "trainwreck" in a mass e-mail that was leaked to the *Village Voice*, and ghosted the project.

Jacobs-Jenkins told a friend that the production was "spiralling." Yet he also

“Jeremy? Are you in there?”

recognized that chaos was an opportunity. “There’s a reason Dionysus is the god of theatre,” he told me. “You cannot control the audience. You cannot control the days that these artists have, that they bring to this space where they rearrange their emotional apparatus to induce a collective hallucination.” At the première, he decided to transmute shame into spectacle, distributing a primer on the controversy and taking the stage to respond with a dramatic monologue. Like Dionysus summoning the maenads, he then gathered the women in the cast—in petticoats and antique underwear—to join him in a frenzied dance to Mary J. Blige’s “No More Drama,” which ended with him crawling offstage. Rites completed, the lights went down and the show began.

“When you headbang in a corset, you don’t forget it,” Wiseman, who played a ditzy belle in both versions of the play, reminisced. She thought it was “badass” that Jacobs-Jenkins didn’t treat the project as “salted earth” after the fiasco at P.S. 122: “One of his great gifts is to deal with big conflict and misunderstanding and get curious.” But it took him a few years to reëmbrace his “Octoroon.” He returned to Berlin to nurse his twice-bruised ego, swearing that there would be no more drama for him. He lived with roommates who spoke minimal English and rented a studio in a former garment factory, where he entered into a creative isolation that, in his words, “rearranged my neurons.”

Ideas for plays burst in on his seclusion. “Gloria” arose because he missed life at the office; “Appropriate,” which already existed in concept, began to cohere. He even found the courage to revisit the “nightmare hellscape” of “An Octoroon,” which he considered reconceiving as an “auto-ethnography.” Then, in the depths of Berlin’s harsh winter, a strange *nostos* beckoned. Jacobs-Jenkins moved in with his father, a retiree, in North Carolina, intending to reconnect with him while reading great “patrememoirs,” or books about father-son relationships. Cabin fever struck, and he drifted back to New York. He told himself that he’d soon return to Berlin. But he kept finding reasons to stay Stateside: a workshop of “Appropriate,” an opportunity to study with the playwright Marsha Norman at Juilliard, gigs writing for television and teaching at N.Y.U.

The excuses detained him long enough for success to arrive. In 2013, “Appropriate” premièred, and Benson got in touch to produce “An Octoroon.” The founder of Signature Theatre, Jim Houghton, who became an important champion of Jacobs-Jenkins, offered him a three-play residency. “He was one of the playwrights who really changed the culture of these midtown nonprofits,” Annie Baker, a friend and a fellow-playwright at Signature, told me. “Branden brought a daring political questioning, a formal experimentation, and a mischievousness to these institutions that they were really lacking.” His Obie was followed by a Pulitzer nomination for “Gloria,” in 2016. That same year, he won both a Windham-Campbell Prize for literature and the MacArthur Fellowship. And so, just months after the quasquicentennial of his muse Dion Boucicault’s death, the alliteratively surnamed former spelling-bee champ had the attentions of a once skeptical theatre world comfortably pinioned.

His work in the seven years since has been daringly restless, from an acrobatically ludicrous vision of Dionysus and his maenads as messy bitches at the “clurb” (“Girls”) to the bold fusion of naturalism and supernatural allegory in “The Comeuppance.” More than one critic has called Jacobs-Jenkins a “chameleon,” a slightly backhanded compliment that sees in the playwright’s versatility a reluctance to open his own veins. Would a truly original artist write so many adaptations, or spend so much time dwelling on theatre’s conventions and rules? Yet even his most “abstract” plays demonstrate that playing with form can be a way to express feeling, especially when confining social scripts inspire us to trace their anatomy.

“Everybody” (2017), Jacobs-Jenkins’s moving rewrite of the medieval morality play “Everyman,” is about facing down the most mortifying of narrative templates: death. The play calls for actors to be assigned their roles randomly at the start of each performance, as though to dramatize its central question: “Why me?” The protagonist, Everybody, begs Friendship, Family, and Love to accompany them beyond the grave. Love eventually agrees, but there is a price. Everybody must strip off their clothes, run around in a circle, and repeat a humiliating formula that initially sounds funny, then kinky, then scary, and, finally, like it might be the only knowable truth in the universe: "This body is just meat! I surrender! I have no control!"

On a rainy day in September, with the subway system paralyzed by record-breaking floods, I fought my way from Brooklyn to Ballet Hispánico, on the Upper West Side, for a workshop of Jacobs-Jenkins's first musical. He shelled pistachios and annotated a script at a table in a mirror-lined rehearsal room, where actors ate takeout and chatted by a grand piano. A stage manager stopped by, like a kindly teacher, to stick a violet star on the corner of my notebook; I began to notice that a disproportionate number of the pens, binders, and even articles of clothing in the room were in shades of lilac, mauve, and eggplant. At around four, the director, Lileana Blain-Cruz, called us all to our feet, leading the room in postprandial stomp-clap-dance. Soon, a tiny young man with a powerful voice was belting lyrics about sorrow, remorse, and the longing for transformation, plunging us into the surreal American melodrama of Prince's "Purple Rain."

"In some ways, I must have manifested this," Jacobs-Jenkins had told me a few days earlier. In 2020, he posed for a photo with the playwrights Dominique Morisseau and Katori Hall, and realized that he was the only one in the group who hadn't written a musical about a hometown hero. "Katori Hall wrote the Tina musical, Dominique wrote the Temptations musical," he recalled thinking. "No one will ever ask me to do a jukebox musical, because I'm from D.C., and, like, no one cares about Roberta Flack. That's all we have, you know?" (Your correspondent, whose father co-wrote "The Closer I Get to You," was aghast.) Shortly thereafter, a producer contacted Jacobs-Jenkins to commission a stage adaptation of "Purple Rain," which, like him, will be turning forty later this year.

Jacobs-Jenkins was ambivalent. Although he'd grown up with Prince's music, he thought that the movie was "bad," and said as much on an exploratory Zoom call. But he agreed to consider the idea—if only for his old mentor Daphne Brooks, a Prince superfan who thought that he'd be an ideal interpreter of the musician's defiant singularity. "It's the philosophy of the sly," she told me. In her view, Jacobs-Jenkins's "ethos of subversion" is consonant with Prince's crusade against the music industry on questions of genre boundaries, appropriateness, and self-definition. What better candidate than the queer author of "An Octoroon" to channel the voice of "Controversy" ("Am I black or white? Am I straight or gay?"), who famously protested his contract with Warner Bros. by scrawling the word "slave" on his cheek?

The universe made it clear that it was time to sign his name on the dotted line and start to grind. When Jacobs-Jenkins, then living in Austin, told his natural-hair stylist that he was up for the job, she revealed a huge neck tattoo of Prince's iconic Love Symbol, which he'd never noticed before. He then saw Prince's face staring down from one of the walls. "It was as though the scales had fallen from my eyes," he said. Jacobs-Jenkins agreed to write the musical, and his old friend Blain-Cruz, whom he'd recently worked with on "Girls," was chosen to direct it. She told me that she was excited to see him apply his formidable intelligence to a musical. "What is somebody who deals with the heft of life going to do with something that by necessity has to live in a more effervescent lane?" she said. "Branden's like, 'The two can coexist!' And that's what I'm excited about."

The protagonist of "Purple Rain" is a young musician called the Kid (Prince), who drives a purple motorcycle, writes strange and passionate songs, and vies with the pimplike bandleader Morris Day for the affections of a beautiful young singer named Apollonia. The version of Jacobs-Jenkins's adaptation that I saw retained most of this story but gave its extravagant characters a twenty-first-century makeover. Day, when he made a pass at Apollonia, called her a "sophisticated multihyphenate mamajama" and suggested that she might have a future focussing on women's empowerment at his media company. Apollonia had evolved from feisty but pliant Galatea to confident creative force. The Kid changed most of all, from a seductively inscrutable and mercurial figure to a more vulnerable young artist. In "Darling Nikki," a song about a "sex fiend," the film character slut-shames Apollonia for defecting to Morris Day. Yet the stunt backfired in the adaptation, triggering a deluge of texts that heralded the Kid's cancellation.

It's a way of tidying up the film's gender politics that also dovetails with Jacobs-Jenkins's career-long investigation of humiliation and rebirth. A crucial moment in the movie arrives when the Kid's father, a failed pianist, attempts suicide. His son integrates one of his unfinished compositions into a new work, parlaying a traumatic inheritance into a radically transformed identity. Jacobs-Jenkins, too, is rummaging around in the archives, doing restoration work on a narrative that may not have turned out exactly as Prince hoped. "I feel him telling the story in the songs that the script can't figure out," he told me. By studying the screenplay, as well as Prince's breakup with the singer Vanity—who was initially cast in Apollonia's role—he aspires to write a "Purple Rain" more original than the original, faithful not to the film but to the songs and their "spiritual autobiography." He attempted a similar trick with "Kindred," Octavia Butler's time-travelling neo-slave narrative, adding characters inspired by early manuscripts of the novel. The reimagining displeased more than a few of her devotees, but "Purple Rain," in all its splendid excess, may be a better fit for his method.

We slipped out early, after a song that Prince wrote for Morris Day called "Gigolos Get Lonely Too." It was date night for Jacobs-Jenkins, who planned to attend the New York Film Festival with his husband, and I offered to walk him down Columbus Avenue to Lincoln Center. As we passed the Museum of Natural History, he told me that the lyrics to "When Doves Cry" were written for a montage cut from the movie, in which animals really did strike curious poses as lovers embraced in a courtyard of violets in bloom.

"We're not even in draft three," he said, excitedly puzzling out the dilemmas involved in renovating the recalcitrant work. He invoked the cultural theorist Walter Benjamin, whose vision of translation as a form of creative echoing has shaped his "adaptive impulse" as a playwright. "I'm just going to write until the last minute, always," he went on. "I used to feel a lot of shame about this, but now I just don't."

Subways remained suspended across the city, and a sea lion was at large in the Central Park Zoo. But the skies were clear by the time we reached the theatre, where Jacobs-Jenkins disappeared into somebody else's show. ♦

THE BEACH HOUSE

JOY WILLIAMS

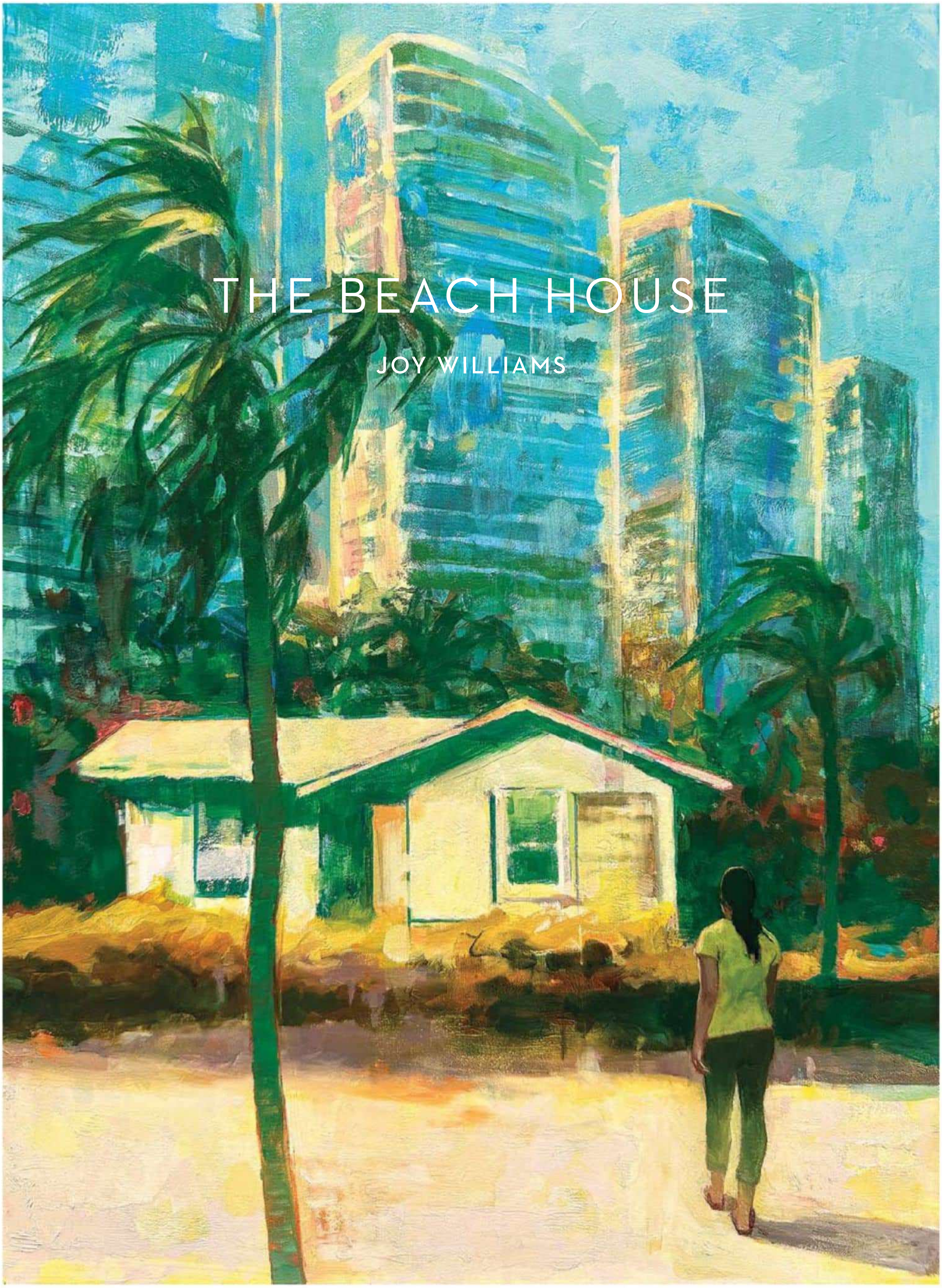


ILLUSTRATION BY MIA BERGERON

She was hoping he would leave her the beach house, counting on this actually, though he had told her he wasn't going to. He'd said he would be leaving it to an organization that offered sanctuary to abandoned German shepherds, but that had to be a joke, right? The German shepherds wouldn't be quartered in the beach house; rather, the shabby but invaluable property would be sold, the proceeds going to an organization that had to be fraudulent, unlicensed, a figment of her father's imagination. Her father said that he loved her—he just wasn't going to leave her the beach house, which to him had become not the beach house at all but, in truth, something else entirely. He believed he was going to pass soon, and he had been thinking about mighty matters. There was much to learn. He was exploring many teachings, and one avenue of thought had somehow led him to disinherit his only child—Amber, her name was, a name she quite reasonably detested.

"I grew up there," she said. "I have memories."

"You collected conchs, put them in boiling water, gouged them out with a fork and spoon, then displayed their empty homes on a shelf in your room," her father said.

"Not all the time," she protested. "You always mention that. It's mean."

Her father was sipping something green from a scratched plastic glass, which must have negated much of the good the beverage might have to offer. It had been prescribed for his blood. There was something not right about his blood. Or was it that something that had to move through his blood wasn't the right shape?

"We've never even known a German shepherd," Amber said.

"I had one as a young man. I brought him into marriage with your mother. You were around, but I guess you can't remember him. Titus."

"I was around?"

"Well, you were. It pains me that you don't recall him."

"Do you have a photograph?"

"No. He didn't photograph well."

She couldn't remember any Titus. She suspected he'd invented this memory just now. But that was all right. Maybe she could argue his incompetency in court, if it came to that, but he was actually pretty competent, though he no longer read or drove. It hadn't been so long since he'd enjoyed swanning around in his jacked-up '92 Bronco, which was now swaddled in the garage. She wished that someone would steal it.

"You're thinking about the Bronco, aren't you," he said. "Well, I'm bequeathing that to Walter."

"Walter is ten years old."

"He'll be fine. Just the other day he said, 'It's perfect, sir.'"

"I was not thinking about that stupid truck. You can sell it for parts, as far as I'm concerned."

"Parts," her father murmured. "No, no, no."

"That kid's unreal."

"Unreal!" He looked incredulous, but she felt it was an act.

"I asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up, and he said, 'I want to know, to dare, to will, and to keep silence.'"

"Admirable, so admirable," her father said.

"What kind of answer is that? He probably read it somewhere."

Her father had swallowed the last of the green liquid but continued to hold the glass.

"When I was a boy around Walter's age, there was a doctor who suspected I was schizophrenic. Don't know what I'd done, probably just going through a phase, but they had a test back then. You had to pretend to drink water from a glass that had nothing in it. If you could do that, they'd say you were O.K. That's what they want. They want you to pretend until you don't know you're pretending anymore."

She hadn't heard that one before, either, but she and her father had never talked much in the best of times. It was hard to converse with sick people. She realized she didn't have the knack.

"Gimme that thing. It'll stain if I don't rinse it right away."

A pelican woven out of something resided in the glass, permanently sealed in a layer of air within its double wall of insulated plastic. The pelican was small, of course, two inches at most.

"Last of a set of twelve," her father called after her as she carried it off.

"I'm going over to the beach house for a while," she said from the kitchen. "Do you want any help preparing for bed?"

"No, no, no," her father said.

"Well, it's all ready for you. I'll see you tomorrow."

Outside, Walter stood, gazing at the contrail-striped sky. He was barefoot and wearing a work apron over his shorts and T-shirt.

"That looks uncomfortable," Amber said.

"It's fire-retardant."

"I don't believe that's acceptable usage anymore."

"It resists ignition," he said, undisturbed. "It also has pockets."

"What are you going to do with the Bronco, Walter?" she demanded.

"Cherish it."

"It's very nice of my father to be giving it to you, but registration and insurance will cost your parents a fortune. Also, the government will probably ban vehicles like that soon."

Walter shrugged. "I have five cavities," he announced.

After a moment, she said, "Are you going to get them filled?"

Walter shrugged again.

"You probably should get them filled."

With that, they parted ways, and she drove ten miles to one of the parking lots that served the beach. She paid the fee, then walked for twenty minutes to the house. It was securely fenced in with stout chain link, inaccessible from the tall condominiums that flanked it. She'd almost been arrested once trying to saunter through their lobbies to the sand. She gazed at the humble structure, attempting to establish a channel of recognition. Were those conch shells still inside? She shuddered. She turned and faced the ocean, assuming a position of contemplation and petition.

A turtle staggered from the waves, wearily dug a shallow hole, and commenced to drop her lovely eggs. Amber had no wish to witness this; she could no longer bear to watch struggling nature. She shut her eyes, feeling that the very act of not looking was helping the turtle out in some way. She became aware, however, of a crowd gathering, forming a circle around the event. She heard someone say, "It'll take a few hours, you know." An A.T.V. swung down the beach to disperse the mob, after which various protests broke out.

Less than a month ago, she and her friend Janine had been here, the weekend of the dolphin-pod grounding. People had tried to shove the dolphins back into the water, but they'd just floated in again. Sleek and smiling, they would not swim away. This had gone on through the evening. People lit tiki torches; they linked arms; they sang "Hallelujah."

"If I hear that frigging Leonard Cohen song one more time, I'm going to strangle somebody," Janine said.

How hopeless everything was, Amber thought.

The bed denied him entry. Where had she learned to make a bed like this? He pulled weakly at the top sheet, noticing that the dog had taken up residence in the corner again tonight. Its dark face was about a yard in length. It watched him impassively as he wrestled with the linens.

The next morning, she said, "Hi, Dad, how was your night?," a query that naturally warranted no response.

Her father was bathed and shaved and wearing his stylish black lounging gown. He did not appear ill. In her experience, ill people appeared a great deal more ill than he did. He was looking out the window at birds fluttering around an empty feeder. The birds were always more interested in it when it was empty.

"Are you going to pay to fix Walter's teeth?" she asked—casually, she hoped.

"What's wrong with his teeth?"

"Cavities."

"I do not know what constitutes payment for what I have done or not done, and neither do you, but at the moment, which we know is fleeting, I have no plans in that regard. He's a nice little fellow. When I first met him, he barely spoke. I determined that he liked words but in isolation, as individuals. He didn't like them gathered together. He seemed to feel they got dumber gathered together."

"I was with you when we moved in, Dad. His mother brought over that awful fudge."

"Can't recall the fudge."

"To welcome us to the neighborhood. It was just awful."

"We're talking about fudge?"

"I saw Walter last evening. He was affecting one of those worker aprons."

"Yes, I ordered one for him. It's a little large, but he likes it."

"Does Walter know we have a beach house?"

"Why would he know that? That's nothing to know."

"Dad, I'm going to look into this organization you're giving the house to. Do due diligence. I fear you're the victim of a scam."

"Open that drawer over there. Take out that large folder. Everything vetted and done. Examine it closely. Take a copy."

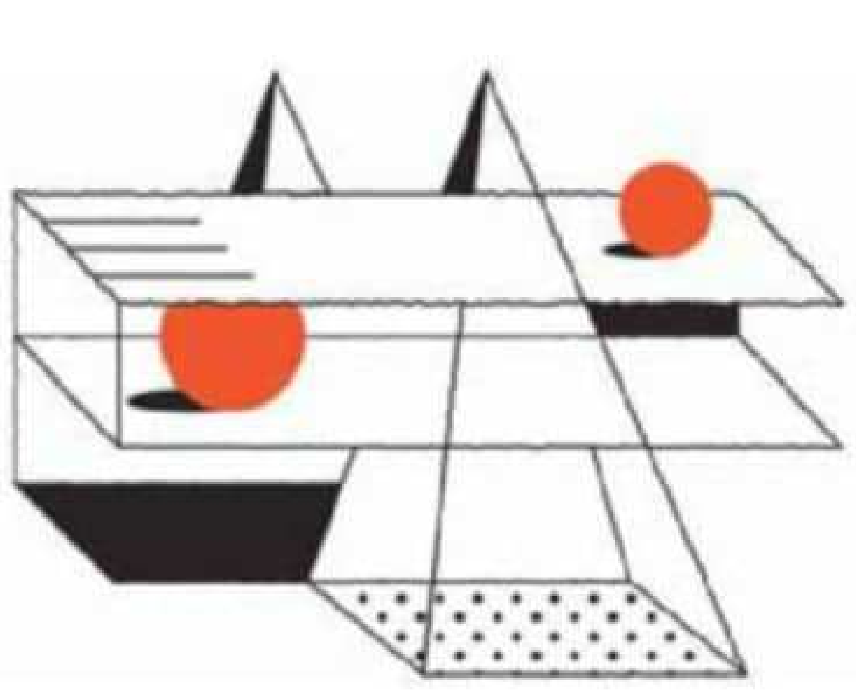
She flipped through a bound sheaf. As a legal document, it certainly looked unassailable, but that was the way lawyers always made these things look. The deed to the house was in her father's name only. The organization for abandoned German shepherds was referred to as In Passage, which sounded so sinister and culty. What were they up to? They didn't have to say, apparently. Somehow they'd been accredited anyway. "I'll take a copy," she said, but shut the drawer without removing one.

"How old are you, dear?" her father asked.

He was on the verge of not knowing who she was at all. It was sad what happened to the aging mind.

"I'll be thirty soon," she said quietly.

"You're thirty-four!" he thundered. "You will not be thirty! You even give the wrong year to the astrologers you're forever seeing. Do you realize how foolish that is!"



He was right. She probably shouldn't be seeking out astrologers and providing them with the wrong coördinates. The latest one had told her that her anxieties concerning her future destitution were more or less unfounded, but it was some other individual being addressed and not Amber at all, an individual who wasn't even paying for the information. The astrologer had a goiter on her neck. Every week, she charged a little more—she was probably saving for an operation to remove that frightful goiter.

"Don't think she's unaware of the situation you've put her in," her father was saying. "Your behavior is compromising her integrity. She has no intention of removing that growth, and if you go to her today you'll find she's no longer available. She won't be there. Business closed. Colorful sign gone."

"She took down the sign?"

"You should try to think more clearly, Amber," her father said.

For him, watching her mind in motion was like going to the movies. She didn't know how he did it.

"You scared me, Dad. You yelled at me."

"I'm sorry, dear. I'm not at my best in the morning. Give me a moment. Would you like to talk about the beach house?"

"Yes."

"Breadth, length, depth, height."

"What?"

"Depth, breadth, height, length."

"Those are just measurements. It's sixteen hundred square feet, plus screened-in porch, now boarded up, two bedrooms, one bath, shower-tub combination, not my favorite, small by today's standards, but its meaning, its significance, lies elsewhere."

"Where?"

"Why don't we go back, Dad? It's still livable, though it won't be for much longer. It needs to be lived in! Why pay rent on this place? You've been paying rent for years. Why did we even leave and come here? I remember I cried."

"These are my final weeks, Amber. You don't seem to be taking them seriously."

If she could just get them back in the beach house. Get the utilities turned on, clean the windows, open the windows, greet the sunrise, set up his bed. . . .

"Death doesn't coexist with life in the past or the future," he was saying, "only in the present."

"Your present could just as well be happening there. Mine, too."

PIANO LESSON

When I was ten, I had an imaginary friend. He lived on pork and beans and played the viola. People would look at us and hear sad music, turn away. That's pretty much how it was, what it was like, for most of 1977. A viola is slightly larger than a violin. It makes a deeper sound. The cello and the double-bass: larger and deeper still. All, like Pinocchio, have hollow wooden bodies, though Pinocchio has more strings and is hollow only metaphorically. Guitars have strings. Harps also. If a harp lay down and fell asleep and you bludgeoned its dreams with felted hammers, then you would have a piano. If you were wearing a tuxedo, you would have a grand piano. If you knocked a clock to the floor and left it there, on its back, staring at the ceiling, spinning slowly to its own sad music, then you would have a record player. Or a carrousel, if you had horses, or luggage. A table turns into a barricade, a vase into a broken vase. The lazy Susan becomes the place where the lazy Susan used to be. Pinocchio wants to be a real boy. The real boy wants to be a robot. The dream of becoming. By 1699, although there were no pianos, some composers were already anticipating their arrival. Sheet music from the time shows notes too high or low to play on the harpsichord. By 1837, with some refinement of the pedals, a player could sustain the notes even after their hands had moved away. By the time I was eleven, I stopped being sad and started to be afraid.

—Richard Siken

"You want to coexist with death in the beach house?"

"Not particularly, not if you put it that way, no. Why are you putting it that way?"

"You really can't remember Titus?"

Did everything depend on this, then? This Titus, an animal that didn't photograph well?

"I'd like to have breakfast now," her father said.

But there was no milk. Going to the store was out of the question; the day had just begun. She had some milk at her own place, right next door, an apartment over the garage, with the annoying Bronco beneath her. It had more toiletries than she did. Sprays and polishes. Scents.

She returned with the milk. There really wasn't very much of it.

Her father was standing at the kitchen counter, a bowl of shredded wheat before him.

"Shredded wheat," he pronounced. After a few spoonfuls, he said, "This milk is delicious. Has an interesting finish."

"I was afraid it might be a little off, just slightly."

"Sometimes the days are worse than the nights," he said.

Occasionally, they got a little back-and-forth going, but it was seldom productive.

"I saw your mother in a dream the other night. She was sitting at a table in what used to be St. Boniface. Undeniably her. Dark healthy hair pulled back. Bangles up to her armpits. Big white teeth. Gesturing to me urgently."

"That's too obvious to be significant."

"Yes, it's embarrassing." He studied the bowl full of sog before him.

"Or maybe she was waving someone else over, someone behind you. That happens sometimes—I've witnessed it happening."

"There's never anyone behind you in a dream, Amber."

St. Boniface Episcopal was a restaurant now. It had been decommissioned. Not decommissioned—that was what they did with battleships. Desanctified. She couldn't afford to go in there unless she found a hundred-dollar bill on the street. For a time, after her mother left, she and her father had attended services at St. Boniface, until she had suddenly fixated on the sacrarium, the special sink connected to a pipe that she'd heard delivered the leftover bread and wine of the Sacrament to the lychee tree in the courtyard, the largest lychee tree on the peninsula. She had inexplicably freaked out over this simple drain, or perhaps it was the idea of it, the idea of it most of all.

"That lychee tree told me a joke once," her father said. "It wasn't original. It was the one about three Episcopalians changing a light bulb."

They were back in the living room.

"I have a luncheon date today, Dad."

"Luncheon. Time flies."

"Let's talk more about the beach house before I leave. I felt we were getting somewhere. I'll be homeless without it, Dad."

If she had to share it with death, she would. Maybe it wouldn't be that much of a problem.

"One day you painted your room black. Those beautiful cypress boards."

"You always mention that, Dad. I've apologized, but you'd told me it was mine to decorate as I wished. We can flip the boards around—nothing could be easier. That's the first thing we'll do."

"The beach house is worth a great deal, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes," she said.

Her father was silent. Slowly, he passed his hand over his hair. This usually meant that he was travelling to a place immune to her presence, a place that indeed contradicted her presence. She might as well go to lunch.

Outside, it was still Florida. Smoke from the burning cane fields inland seasoned the air. He stepped into the yard clutching a book—it hardly mattered now which one. The dog did not accompany him. No reason was provided. But it was possible that he'd been given other assignments, once it was clear that the hoped-for ideal in this case would not be realized.

Amber and Janine were seated in a booth at a divey establishment called the Lorelei. At the bar were two men whose conversation could be heard from where they were sitting.

"Did Ted Kaczynski have a deck of tarot cards in his cell?"

"You asking me? I'd say he did."

"Did he know how to use it?"

"Probably more than most unimprisoned people do."

"I bet they didn't let him keep it. I bet they taunted him and threatened to take it away and then they did."

"You're probably right, the bastards."

The women listened attentively, but the bar hounds said nothing more.

"I am still just so upset," Janine began, as she usually did. Her situation was even graver than Amber's, having already come to pass. Her mother, unbeknownst to all save a financial adviser, had taken out a reverse mortgage and exhausted its returns in no time. She'd then died. "On the dot," as Janine had put it. Janine had inherited nothing.

"That was a nice house," Amber said.

"I should have been more suspicious. I thought she was being careful with money. I told you, she'd take a couple of squares of toilet paper and fold them up for dinner napkins. I thought she was living within a budget. I hated going over there for dinner."

"But she was a wonderful cook, wasn't she?" Amber said.

"She was, but those little squares of toiler paper . . ."

"You could have brought over some cloth napkins," Amber said, but she was thinking of Ted Kaczynski's tarot deck. What could it possibly have shown him, except the Ten of Swords over and over? The jailers had probably done him a favor.

"What do you mean?" Janine said. "How would that have helped?"

At the Lorelei, they limited themselves to a single carafe of wine and a plate of French fries, now consumed.

"I would just so love to get soaked," Janine said, "and remain soaked until somebody becomes concerned and arranges a stay in one of those restful rehabilitation facilities."

"But who would do that for you? Those places are expensive."

"I have an aunt who sometimes helps me out. It's more about her than about me, though. It's always on her terms. She's been in rehab a few times. She's even had electric-shock treatments, which she said helped her a lot."

"I've heard those things are very hit or miss," Amber said earnestly.

"Yes. No, I'd pass on that."

One of the bar hounds left.

"I don't think they knew each other," Amber said.

"We didn't want to accrue," Janine said. "Our parents accrued, and when they died, which is sad but everyone has to, it would all pass down to us, and we would turn it into something better for us than accruing."

Amber agreed. "All we want is to be able to live our lives."

"But times have changed. They're using everything up themselves, or they're giving it to something wacky like your father's doing. Nobody's providing for us anymore, that's a fact. We are of that age. We didn't see it coming. It's like a plague or something—it may eventually pass but not in time for us." She sighed. "It's your turn to spring for this swill, isn't it?"

From her jacket pocket, Amber removed a small notebook with a tiny eraserless pencil attached to it by a dirty ribbon. The pencil always gave her the creeps, but it was handy. She peered at a page. It was on record: it was her turn.

"Wow, two hundred dryer sheets. Who will I even be two hundred dryer sheets from now?"

Walter had not even been born when they had moved out of the beach house and into the undistinguished rental. That was how long it had been. It was appalling. In no time, the child would have his driver's license. The first year, the rule would be no driving at night. This he would ignore. Meanwhile, her father would be gone, and she'd be without shelter, crouched on the street, fortunate to be in possession of a day-old sandwich.

Her father was sitting outside at a picnic table made of plastic bottles that would otherwise have ended up in the ocean. Benches had been affixed to it by bolts. The color, an unlikely tulip red, had been imposed on it throughout by some method. He was still wearing the stylish gown.

"You just missed Walter," her father said. "Our word of the day is 'noumenon.' That is a thing as it is in itself . . . an example being . . . God."

She was almost certain that "noumenon" had been the word of the day more than once. He was probably showing off for Walter.

"You shouldn't be out here, Dad. It's too hot. You're not even sweating—that means you're too hot."

"Walter told me his parents would like to take possession of the Bronco now. They know someone who's ready to purchase it, as is, for a reasonable price."

"As is?"

"I said that, too, in precisely the same manner. I'm quite aware what those words imply, but in the case of the Bronco they're irrelevant. The money would be placed in Walter's education fund."

"You're kidding. An education fund?"

"Ridiculous, of course, but Walter assured me that the Bronco would not pass into another's hands."

"That's good, I guess, but perhaps you might want to question some of the decisions you've been making recently, like perhaps you've been putting your faith in the wrong people."

"My faith in people is very small." He had untangled his long legs from the apparatus that was the picnic table and was standing, swaying slightly. "I'd like to have Walter's parents rubbed out. Would you be able to do that for me?"

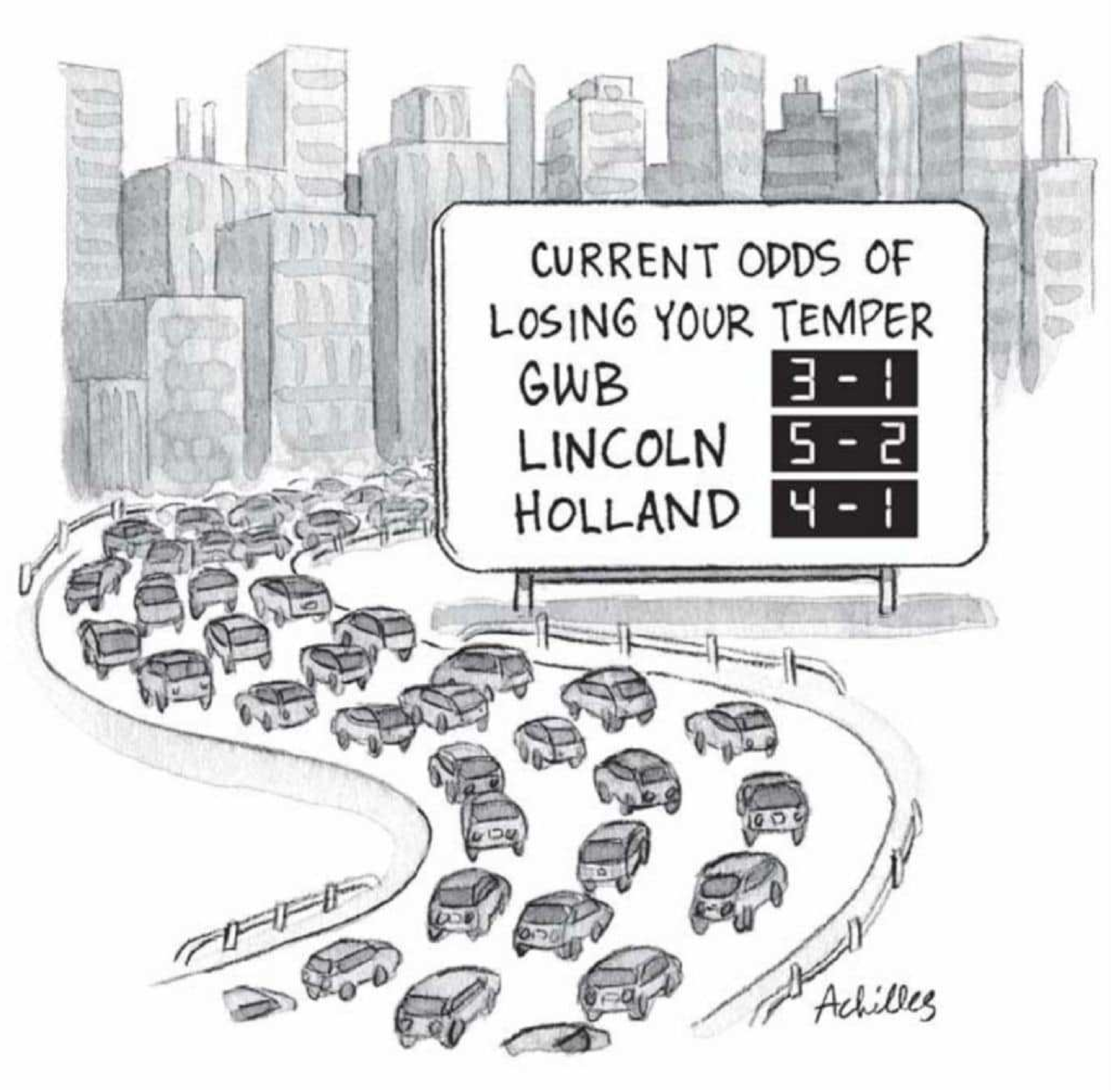
"Rubbed out? You mean murdered? I don't think so, Dad. Why don't we just move away from them, move to the beach house. . . ."

He had struck off across the lawn, in quick, erratic steps. She realized that something was happening, that this was when what happens begins. Still, she couldn't seem to hurry after him for a moment. The door opened and settled shut.

In the kitchen, she exclaimed, "When did you fall! How long have you been lying there!"

"Not long, though that's hardly reassuring. I'm just jarred. Jarred," he said doubtfully.

She pulled him upright, and he managed to access the ugly chair he so favored.



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"I didn't hear anything snap. I had put my head in the freezer compartment for a bit. It felt so good."

"You mustn't do that when you feel hot. It's bad for you, and it messes up the ice-maker."

"I took a tumble, but I feel quite conscious. More conscious, possibly. Nothing is before or after. Important to realize, Ember."

"Amber, Dad, Amber."

"What were your mother and I thinking, right? A name like that . . ."

"Dad, I'm taking you to the hospital."

"Certainly not there."

"I'll call the ambulance. If you come by ambulance, they see you sooner."

"I, too, want to get on with it, but let's just remain here for now. You really do feel incapable of rubbing out Walter's parents? It's important to help the next generation along."

"I'm your next generation, Dad."

"Sometimes it's for the best to skip one now and then. . . . Well, maybe Walter will do it. He has good judgment."

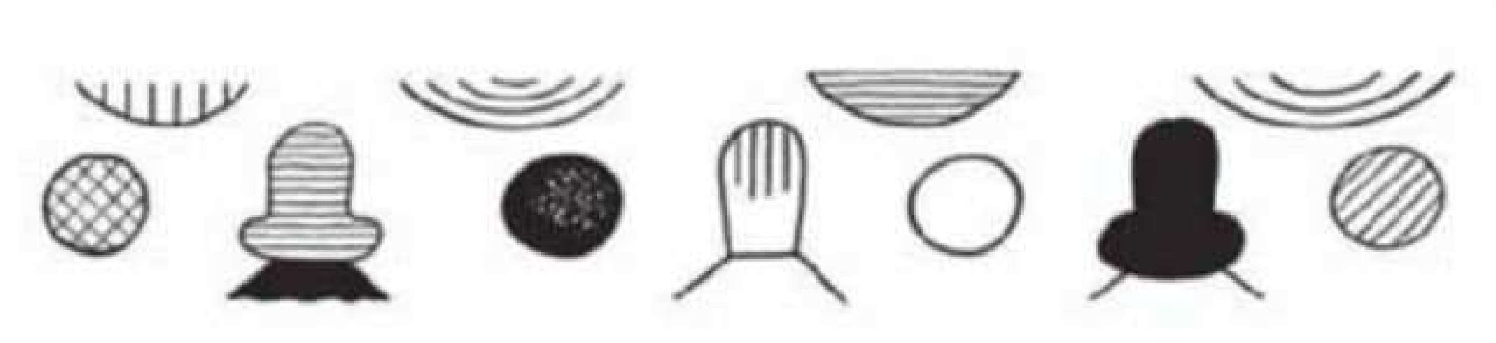
The time was coming, the time had already come. Amber desperately wanted to go into the next room. There had to be something to do in there. She felt a little shaky, considerably shaky. Her father seemed calm. He was speaking nonsense, of course, but he didn't seem agitated. He looked pretty much the same as he always did. She wondered if she should ask him if she could go into the next room or tell him that she was going into the next room.

"Ember, would you get me a blanket? A lightweight one. The striped one the dog chewed."

There weren't any dog-chewed blankets in there, of that she was certain, but, "Yes," she said. "Yes."

He closed his eyes. His head felt refreshed from the freezer still, his thoughts moving in an orderly fashion, like children in a snaking line, holding hands and following their teacher out of a building where some dangerous event was commencing. Like little children, his thoughts, innocent, trusting, and afraid. But who was this teacher? She was new to him. He was a transfer. This was his first day. ♦

THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

MAKE IT HURT

Amid the ebbing of empire, Frantz Fanon and Ian Fleming agreed on one thing.

BY DANIEL IMMERWAHR

More than fifty years later, Zohra Drif could still picture the Milk Bar in Algiers on September 30, 1956. It was white and shining, she recalled, awash in laughter, young voices, "summer colors, the smell of pastries, and even the distant twittering of birds." Drif, a well-coiffed law student in a stylish lavender dress, ordered a peach-Melba ice cream and wedged her beach bag against the counter. She paid, tipped, and left without her bag. The bomb inside it exploded soon afterward.

Looking back, Drif felt little regret about the three who died and the twelve—including children—who lost limbs from her bomb and from a second that detonated in another café minutes later. The European cafégoers weren't civilians, in her view, but colonizers. Their "offensive carefree attitudes" made a painful contrast to those of the eighty thousand Muslims, herself included, penned by barbed wire and checkpoints within what she described as the "open-air prison" of Algiers's Casbah. The month before, European settlers had bombed an apartment building in the Casbah, killing seventy.

Algerians had been waging an independence war for nearly two years, and the French had been fighting back fiercely, including with widespread torture and indiscriminate killings. The September 30th bombings, however, marked what Drif called a "turning point," bringing the war "to the heart of the enemy districts." Yet even the Communist who had built the rebels' explosives laboratory balked at bombing crowded public places. The philosopher Albert Camus, an Algerian-born Frenchman, sympathized with the Algerians but could no longer support them. Their attacks, he noted, might kill his mother: "If *that* is justice, then I prefer my mother."

Nearly the only French writer to defend the bombs was the Martinican psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, who directed a hospital near Algiers. Attacks on civilians were the "logical consequence" of France's "systematic dehumanization" of Algerians, he argued. Fanon had already been secretly aiding the rebels, but shortly after the Milk Bar bombing he resigned his post and joined them. The authorities raided his hospital, killed one of his co-workers, and threw the battered body of another into a pigsty for the hogs to devour. (That man survived, barely.)

Fanon did not back down. He became, his biographer David Macey wrote, the "most famous spokesman" of Third Worldism and a staunch defender of anticolonial violence. "Every Frenchman in Algeria is at the present time an enemy soldier," Fanon insisted. Killing French people wasn't only tactically necessary and morally justified; it was therapeutic. In his view, violence was a "cleansing force" ("*la violence désintoxique*") that "rids the colonized of their inferiority complex."

Perhaps it could even induce one in the colonizers. A month after the Milk Bar bombing, France joined Britain and Israel in an invasion of Egypt. The aim was to reverse Egypt's nationalization of the Suez Canal but also, Fanon wrote, "to strike the Algerian revolution," given Egypt's support for the rebels. Either way, it was a fiasco. The United States made the invaders retreat—a shattering humiliation for the formerly supreme British Empire. The British Prime Minister Anthony Eden, already frazzled and taking amphetamines, had a nervous breakdown.

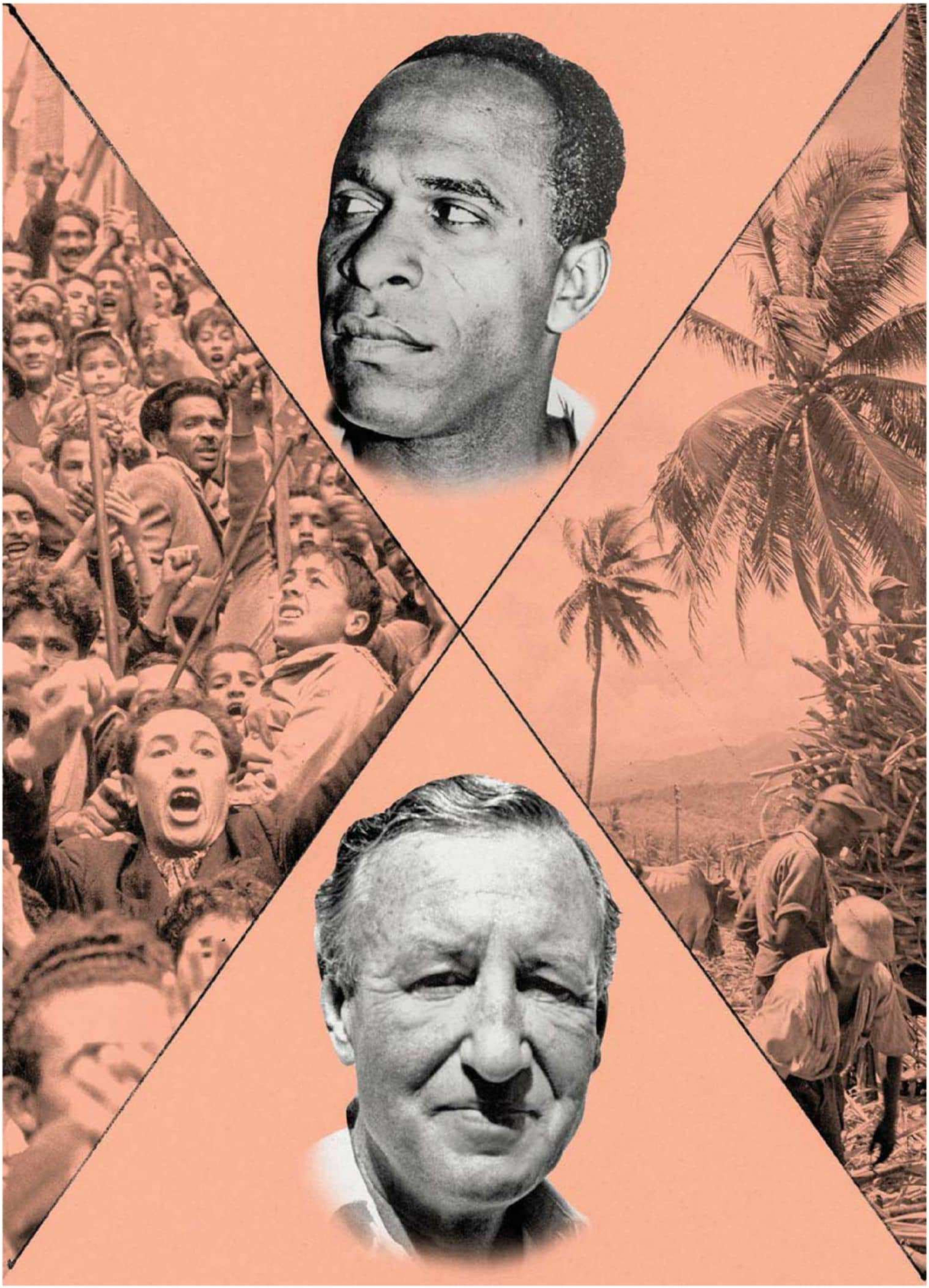
Eden fled to Jamaica, a calmer corner of the Empire, where he could sunbathe, swim, and paddle a rubber boat around a reef. "I do not think there is any other place anywhere that could have given me the rest I had to have," Eden wrote to his host. That host, the author Ian Fleming, knew Jamaica's restorative power, too. It was at his estate there, Goldeneye, that he wrote all of his James Bond novels.

Just as Algiers shone a spotlight on Fanon, Suez shone one on Fleming. His first four Bond books had not had spectacular sales, and Fleming considered killing off the character. But the headlines brought attention to Fleming's hero, who compared favorably with his nervous wreck of a house guest. Here was a man who, faced with Britain's imperial collapse, did not cower but dashed around the world with a dinner jacket and a pistol. Eden's fall was Bond's rise, and Fleming became a celebrity—the "oldest Beatle," his irritated wife, Ann, later called him.

Fleming's fame is undimmed, in large part owing to the twenty-seven James Bond films. Fanon lives on, too, as a mainstay of the college syllabus and the rebel's bookshelf. Today, they are probably the most enduring authors on decolonization, Fanon for and Fleming against.

The pair never met, and they would have hated each other. Yet, as important new biographies reveal, they had much in common. Adam Shatz's "The Rebel's Clinic" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) and Nicholas Shakespeare's "Ian Fleming" (recently published in the U.K. and forthcoming in the U.S. from Harper) present

ABOVE: PHILIPPE PETIT-ROULET



Secret identities, cover stories, cunning ruses: there were times when Fanon's life resembled that of Fleming's hero, James Bond.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY MARK HARRIS

two Caribbean-connected authors who became entangled in espionage. They saw the end of empire as a wrenching psychological event. Healing its wounds, both believed, would require violence.

That Ian Fleming should have thought about decolonization at all was surprising. A champagne cork bobbing along on the sea of life, he did not initially seem overburdened with profundity. Fleming's grandfather was a wealthy financier—Shakespeare compares him to Logan Roy, from HBO's "Succession"—and Ian suffered the symptoms of affluenza. "Everyone felt that he was just a rich, rather bored, rather aloof young man," a contemporary recalled. Fine things and heedless women dropped easily into Fleming's outstretched arms.

Too easily, perhaps. Fleming, who was born in 1908, drifted through Eton and the Royal Military College, bastions of the British élite, without earning diplomas. He seemed far less impressive than his father, Val, who died a hero's death in the First World War, or his older brother, Peter, a gifted writer. His mother sent the aimless youth to a chalet in the Austrian Alps which served as a combination university and sanatorium.

Fleming's tutors there, Ernan Forbes Dennis and Phyllis Bottome, were devotees of Alfred Adler, the Viennese psychotherapist. Adler had coined the term "inferiority complex" and placed great importance on birth order. Ian, overshadowed by his brother, seemed a textbook case. Dennis and Bottome treated him as a laboratory subject for Adlerian therapy, with Adler helping from afar. Without this intervention, his psychiatrist felt, Fleming would have become a psychopath. With it, he was still a rake, but a well-read, stable one. (Fleming gratefully inserted an Adler reference into a Bond novel.)

After faring poorly on the Foreign Service exam, Fleming tried journalism, then finance (he ranked "among the world's worst stockbrokers," a friend said). Nothing in these endeavors suggested military greatness, but in 1939 Britain's Director of Naval Intelligence, John Henry Godfrey, tapped Fleming to be his assistant. This odd choice, Shakespeare explains, had Adlerian grounds. Godfrey also had a towering older brother, and his resentment of that "tyranny," as Godfrey called it, drew him to the underqualified Fleming.

The usual thing to say about Fleming's intelligence work is that he was a deskbound underling—a "microscopic but perky cog," the writer Simon Winder called him—who turned his daydreams into spy novels. But Shakespeare presents evidence of Fleming's centrality. "I shared *all* secrets with him," Godfrey explained, so that if Godfrey were "knocked out" his subordinate could step up. One officer felt that it was Fleming, not Godfrey, who effectively directed naval intelligence for most of the Second World War. If Fleming wasn't Bond, he bore some resemblance to Bond's chief, the spymaster M.

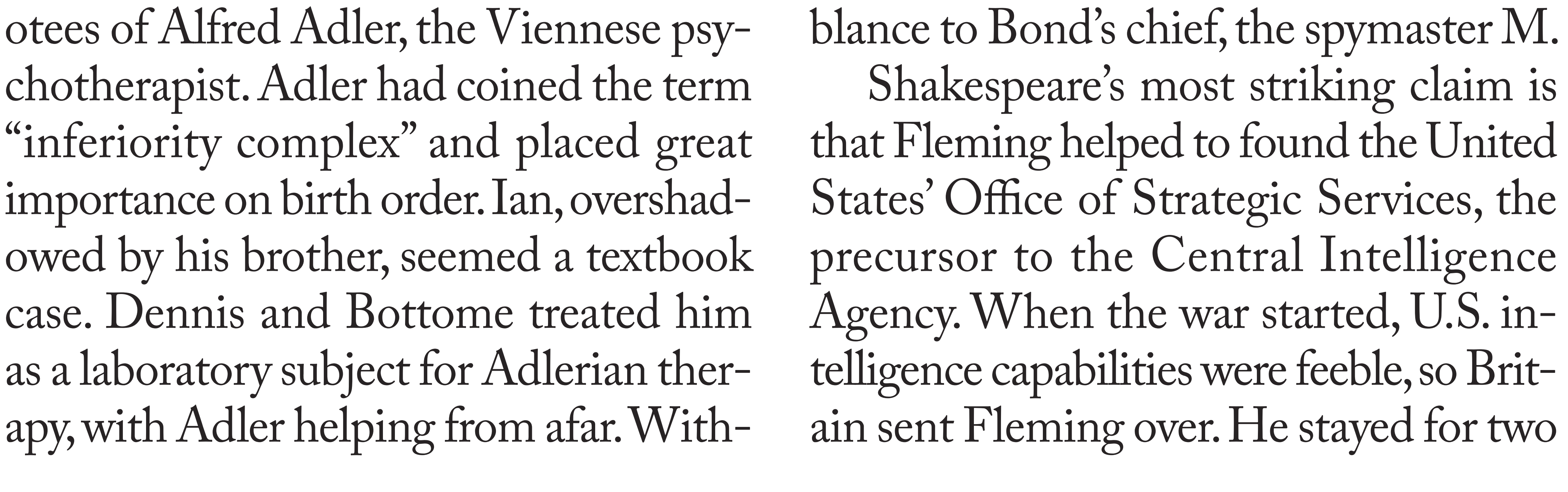
Shakespeare's most striking claim is that Fleming helped to found the United States' Office of Strategic Services, the precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency. When the war started, U.S. intelligence capabilities were feeble, so Britain sent Fleming over. He stayed for two months in Georgetown, often with William J. Donovan, the future O.S.S. director, outlining the British system and making suggestions. In fact, Fleming claimed to have written the original O.S.S. charter with Donovan.

The war also took Fleming to the Caribbean. When it was over, he declared, he would "just live in Jamaica and lap it up." Fleming bought a beachfront estate (Goldeneye), hired servants (they addressed him as Commander), and took a mistress ("Ian's black wife," Ann called her, though she was neither). He stayed there every winter, relishing the "unbounded drink" and the "infinite cigars rolled on Jamaican thighs."

"Would these books have been born if I had not been living in the gorgeous vacuum of a Jamaican holiday?" Fleming later wrote. "I doubt it." He dreamed up Bond while swimming at Goldeneye, in 1952, and wrote the Bond books there, one per winter. Four of the fourteen feature Jamaican settings, and two more send Bond to nearby Nassau and Miami. In the first novel, "Casino Royale," Bond arrives at the eponymous French casino posing as a "Jamaican plantocrat" and scans his surroundings through West Indian eyes: a card player's hands are "two pink crabs," the table's baize is a "green lagoon," and Bond's enemy, Le Chiffre, watches him "like an octopus under a rock."

Despite his Caribbean ties, Fleming remained, to use Fanon's phrase, "sealed in his whiteness." His novels teem with outrageous stereotypes: Blacks are "apes," Koreans are "lower than apes," and the Japanese are a barely civilized "separate human species." The thought of such people coming into their own was, for Fleming, alarming. The great powers will "reap the father and mother of a whirlwind by quote liberating unquote the colonial peoples," one of Bond's allies warns. "Give 'em a thousand years, yes. But give 'em ten, no. You're only taking away their blowpipes and giving them machine guns."

It's a fear that haunts Fleming's novels. Supervillains of complex hues menace the world from breakaway spaces: islands, large ships, secret fortresses, newly independent countries. "Mister Bond, power is sovereignty," Doctor No, a half-Chinese criminal with a Caribbean island, explains. It falls to Bond to restore No's island to British rule.



"Don't be mad we broke your window playing baseball—or else."

PREVIOUS SPREAD: SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS (LEFT TO RIGHT) BY DOMINIQUE BERRETTY / GETTY; EVERETT / ALAMY; MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES / GETTY; HARRY BENSON / GETTY

This was imperialist escapism, and the more territory Britain lost the more Fleming’s sales grew. But Fleming struggled, amid success, to stay upbeat. In the final Bond novel, “The Man with the Golden Gun” (1965), written in the wake of Jamaican independence, the villains allude to a looming “big black uprising,” which Bond does nothing to forestall. He kills a Rastafarian (“He smelled quite horrible”) and forces some Jamaican women to dance naked. Yet he ends the book hospitalized, recovering from poison and, like Eden, “acute nervous exhaustion.”

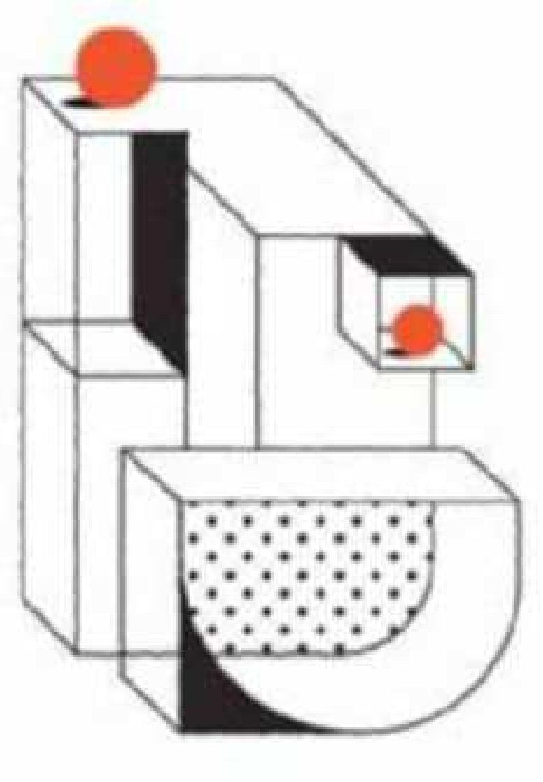
By all rights, it was the diligent Frantz Fanon, not the dissolute Ian Fleming, who should have passed easily through life’s open doors. Fanon followed the rules assiduously. Was Martinique French? Then so was he. “*Je suis français*” were the first words Fanon could write, and his French was exquisite. He had both African and European forebears (hence the name Frantz, apparently a nod to his Germanic heritage), but, when he watched “Tarzan,” he identified with Tarzan, not the Africans.

In the Second World War, France surrendered but Frantz stood firm; in 1943, at seventeen, he fled Martinique, making a clandestine, treacherous sea journey to Dominica to join Charles de Gaulle’s Free French Forces. Fighting with them in Europe, he won a medal and sustained a shrapnel wound. A worse blow, however, came to Fanon’s psyche. For the first time, he saw the scorn in which he, a Black man, was held by the Europeans he had helped liberate. “He was torn, quartered,” his brother Joby recalled.

After the war, Fanon returned to Europe, more serious yet less controlled. He wrote three absurdist plays that vibrated with frustrated meaning. (“I want to spatter this pregnant sky with a vertiginous act!” one character announces.) After a brief attempt at dentistry (“I will teach you to bite into the mammaries of life,” another character declares), Fanon turned to psychiatry (“I fragment the hypotenuse that redoubles the World”—it sounds better in French).

He never stopped writing drama, though. His theoretical texts described social types—the West Indian, the colonist, the colonized intellectual—as if they were characters in a play. Fanon felt that Alfred Adler’s “individual psychology” fell short for the colonized because, under imperialism, whole populations could become neurotic, with the colonizers playing the role of Adler’s older brother. Looking back on his Francophilic upbringing in Martinique, Fanon recognized an inferiority complex induced by empire.

He saw worse when he took a post in Algeria, in 1953. Unlike Martinique, Algeria had recently been scarred by violence, most notably in 1945, when, after a clash with nationalists, the French massacred thousands of Algerians. In 1954, nationalists launched a war of liberation. Fanon’s patients included the lone survivor of a massacre, a police torturer, and two Muslim youths who had killed their European friend.



Individual traumas could be handled clinically, but what about societal ones? Fanon believed that the act of defying empire could cure Algerian neuroses. “The colonized man liberates himself in and through violence,” Fanon wrote. Shatz, eager to present a palatable version of his subject, hastens to add that, for Fanon, vengeance was only a step on the liberation ladder. Still, it was a crucial step. As Fanon insisted, what the colonized needed wasn’t concessions granted by the master but “quite literally the death of this master.”

It’s tempting to hear this as the voice of the downtrodden, finally free to speak harsh truths. But Fanon was awkwardly positioned vis-à-vis those truths. His first book, “Black Skin, White Masks” (1952), criticized Black men who desired white women, yet Fanon’s main partners were white. His second, “A Dying Colonialism” (1959), was an insider’s view of Algerian nationalism by an outsider who spoke neither Arabic nor Berber. His third, “The Wretched of the Earth” (1961), enjoined natives to attack settlers, though in Algeria Fanon was best classified as a settler himself. Shatz describes Fanon’s extremism as the “zeal of a convert”—just as Fanon spoke better French than the French, he became, as a revolutionary, “more Algerian than the Algerians.”

Fanon considered taking up arms. Instead, he aided the National Liberation Front (F.L.N.) by furtively treating rebels in his psychiatric hospital. After the authorities caught wind of his activities, he moved to neighboring Tunisia, where he continued treating combatants and writing. Fanon was never at the revolution’s helm, Shatz explains, but he mattered enough to require a bodyguard, an alias, and a false passport. His chief task was propaganda: explaining the F.L.N. to outsiders. If this required cleaning up the facts—as when the F.L.N. massacred hundreds of Algerians connected to a rival nationalist group—Fanon stood ready with a mop. Revolutionaries could never commit such crimes, he insisted; it must have been the French.

Secret identities, cover stories, cunning ruses: there were times when Fanon’s life resembled Bond’s. In 1959, when he visited Rome for medical treatment, the car slated to collect him exploded. Shatz suggests that this was the work of French terrorists. Worried about another attempt, Fanon quietly changed his hospital room. A gunman burst into his original room shortly afterward.

The next year, Fanon joined an undercover commando to establish a Saharan route into Algeria. Opening “great lines” between the independent countries south of the Sahara and the still unfree Algeria, he hoped, would allow him to smuggle weapons and march armies across the vast desert—to “hurl a continent against the last ramparts of colonial power.”

The James Bond films brim with sophisticated gadgets, generously supplied by Bond’s colleague Q. The novels, however, are low-tech and mention Q only obliquely. Instead, Bond relies on the assistance of Sir James Molony, the “greatest neurologist in England.” Molony’s services are repeatedly required because Bond is a mess. He has nightmares, wobbles under stress, suffers “psychoneurosis,” requires electroconvulsive therapy, and despises his own reflection.

Fleming had his own maladies. He wrote of his “constant depression” when contemplating “the fantastically rapid contraction of our influence, commercial and cultural, over half the globe.” In the novels, Bond’s personal woes and Britain’s political ones are linked. They are resolved only when Bond, with his license to kill, rouses himself to dispatch the Empire's enemies. This was Fanon in reverse: bloodshed as balm not for the colonized but the colonizer.

This commitment to carnage was, it should be said, unusual in the era. In most cases, European leaders facing rising nationalism relented before reaching the battlefield. Nationalists, too, were generally cautious about using force. "We have chosen just one weapon for our struggle, and that weapon is non-violence," Patrice Lumumba, one of decolonizing Africa's leading lights, explained.

Algeria was a special case. It had a million white settlers, who were largely hellbent on keeping Algeria French. Some even tried to assassinate France's President de Gaulle, after he proved amenable to Algerian independence. Other African countries with European settlers, like South Africa, Southern Rhodesia, Kenya, and Mozambique, would see high levels of violence, too. (Mozambique now has an AK-47 on its flag.) Even so, war was not the norm. Between the Second World War and Algeria's independence, in 1962, twenty-eight African colonies became free, yet only four saw anticolonial fighting at any scale—and none approached Algeria's. Lumumba gained power in the former Belgian Congo by election, not violence.

For Fanon, peaceful liberation was a fool's paradise. In a telling passage in "Black Skin, White Masks," he describes the French Caribbean, where slavery had been abolished and rights extended by French decree, as "unbearable." He prefers the United States, where "the Negro battles and is battled." On that "field of battle, its four corners marked by the scores of Negroes hanged by their testicles," Fanon envisions a "majestic" monument arising. At its top stands, finally, "a white man and a black man *hand in hand*."

These bloody visions turned real for Fanon in Algeria. French interrogators there regularly used torture; soldiers had applied electric shocks to the vagina of one of Zohra Drif's comrades and violated another with a beer bottle. When French intellectuals expressed horror, Fanon rolled his eyes. Couldn't they see that their whole empire was built on such acts? Torture, at least, clarified things. "With his back to the wall, the knife at his throat, or to be more exact the electrode on his genitals, the colonized subject is bound to stop telling stories," Fanon wrote. In such moments, "the colonized subject discovers reality."

In "Casino Royale," Bond has his own encounter with reality when Le Chiffre captures and sadistically interrogates him, assailing his exposed testicles. Bond fears entering a "sexual twilight" where he'll feel pleasure and develop a "masochistic infatuation" with his tormentor. (Flagellation was an important element of Fleming's own sexual diet.) Yet after a stumble into relativism—perhaps Communism isn't so bad?—Bond rights himself. The torment of his "sensitive parts," plus a romantic betrayal, steels his resolve, and he dedicates his life to hunting Britain's foes.

This was direct violence: not the impersonality of a café bombing but the intimacy of the interrogation room. And, as the testicles suggest, it was fundamentally male. Fleming wrote a terrible Bond novel from a woman's perspective ("The Spy Who Loved Me"), and Fanon discussed Muslim women who infiltrated settler spaces (though he understated their importance, his biographer Macey shows). Yet, mostly, their protagonists were men, with women serving occasionally as props in men's psychological journeys. "When my restless hands caress those white breasts," Fanon wrote, "they grasp white civilization." Surely Bond knew the feeling.

Both authors redirected violence onto their partners: Fanon publicly struck his wife and Fleming practiced sadomasochism. And both saw women as complicit. "Just as there are faces that ask to be slapped," Fanon asked, "can one not speak of women who ask to be raped?" One could, and Fleming frequently did. "All women love semi-rape," his lone female narrator explained. "They love to be taken." After Bond kills Doctor No, his dark-skinned (yet white) Jamaican companion throws herself at him, demanding "slave-time." Such passages are cringeworthy, but they weren't misfires. Rape, torture, subjugation—this was empire, red in tooth and claw.

It was all leading, Fanon thought, to the "great showdown." Yet the collapse of Europe's empires didn't only mean the rise of Third World nationalism; it also meant the rise of the United States. And neither author quite knew what to make of that.

For someone obsessed with empire, Fanon had surprisingly little to say about the world's greatest power. The United States was a "country of lynchers," he felt, yet also a potential ally—he touted John F. Kennedy's "decisive and implacable" opposition to French colonialism. Fanon's openness to U.S. power may help explain his disastrous alliance with the C.I.A.-backed Angolan leader Holden Roberto, who fought both colonizers and Angolan leftists. Shatz reveals that Roberto informed Fanon of a secret plot against Lumumba (there were several, including one involving a C.I.A. assassin). Roberto regarded Lumumba as "a puppet in the hands of international communism" and believed that "blood must flow." When Lumumba's enemies killed and dismembered him, in January, 1961, Fanon blamed himself.

Fanon had hoped to die in battle, but instead he grew sick with leukemia. He flew to Moscow for treatment, without success. Ailing, he dictated his most impassioned and important book, "The Wretched of the Earth." Then, accepting the help of the C.I.A., Fanon moved with his family to Bethesda, Maryland, for care (Roberto visited him in the hospital there). Fanon died in December, 1961, at the age of thirty-six; the U.S. Air Force carried his body back to Africa.

Fleming, too, fell into the United States' widening gyre. After Suez, his books sold well, but it wasn't until John F. Kennedy came out as a Fleming fan, in 1961, that "the gusher burst," as Fleming's New York agent put it. U.S. sales grew frenzied, and the films followed. The first, "Dr. No," opened in the U.K. in October, 1962, two weeks before the Cuban missile crisis. With the free world menaced by nuclear arms on a Caribbean island, life seemed to be imitating Bond, and Bondmania mounted further.

Fleming played along but regarded the United States—"Eldollarado," he called it—warily. An affable C.I.A. officer in the novels, Felix Leiter, seems to exist only to be diminished: he is bursting with cash and warm feelings, but he defers constantly to Bond and soon gets horribly maimed. Fleming also inserted references to the real-life C.I.A. director Allen Dulles, a known Bond admirer, into three of the books. Yet this flash of reality only highlights how much of Bond—the shark tanks, the loquacious villains, the endlessly up-for-it women—is consoling fantasy. Perhaps the largest consolation is the idea that, in the actual Cold War, a British spy would be allowed at the adults' table.

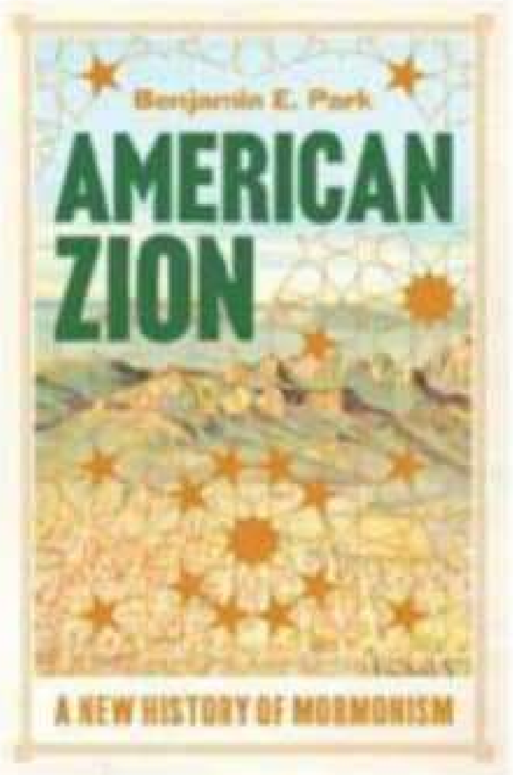
In the end, Fleming couldn't keep pace with the insatiable U.S. market. A lifetime of frankly heroic excess (bourbon counterbalanced the harms of cigarettes, he maintained) had wrecked him. "I smell the undertaker's wind," Fleming told his niece. He died soon after, in August, 1964, of a heart attack.

Fanon and Fleming envisioned empire ending, but neither lived to see it fully happen. In Algeria, decolonization snagged on the issue of settlers and provided exactly the "murderous and decisive confrontation" that Fanon hoped for. Yet was this, in the end, therapeutic? The eight-year war not only killed hundreds of thousands; it elevated men of violence to power, with predictable consequences. Three years after independence, Algeria's President was overthrown in an Army coup, and the ways of war—torture, surveillance, dictatorship—continued into the time of peace. Had Fanon survived leukemia, he may not have survived Algeria.

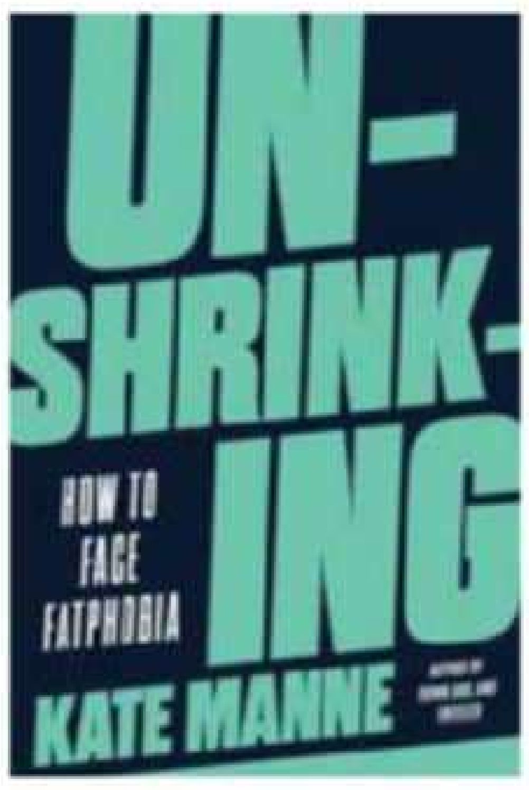
A month after the exhausted French abandoned Algeria, in 1962, the British, in a flurry of self-congratulation, allowed Jamaica to go free peacefully. Fleming insisted that Jamaicans still carried the Queen in their hearts, but the gin-soaked ruling class to which he belonged washed out with the tide. In 1976, Goldeneye was bought, sight unseen, by Bob Marley, the bard of Third World rebellion, who had overtaken Fleming as Jamaica's leading cultural export. Marley deemed the estate too posh, though, and signed it over to his producer.

It was an apt symbol. Empire wasn't simply a gladiatorial contest; it was also a complex business of currency areas, tariffs, and property rights. Ending it required more than achieving catharsis. There's something undeniably satisfying about the dramatic scenes that Fanon and Fleming conjured: you *want* to see the villain get eaten by an octopus and his base blown up. But history doesn't always offer that release. Some things die not with a bang but with a whimper. ♦

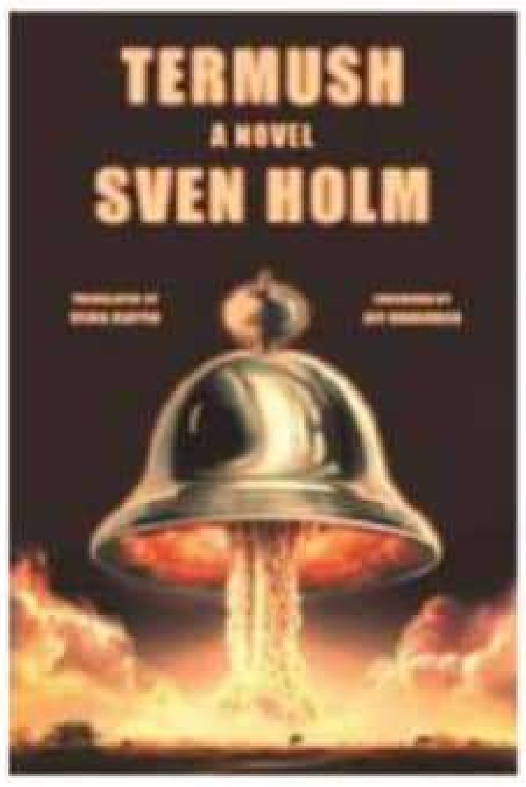
BRIEFLY NOTED



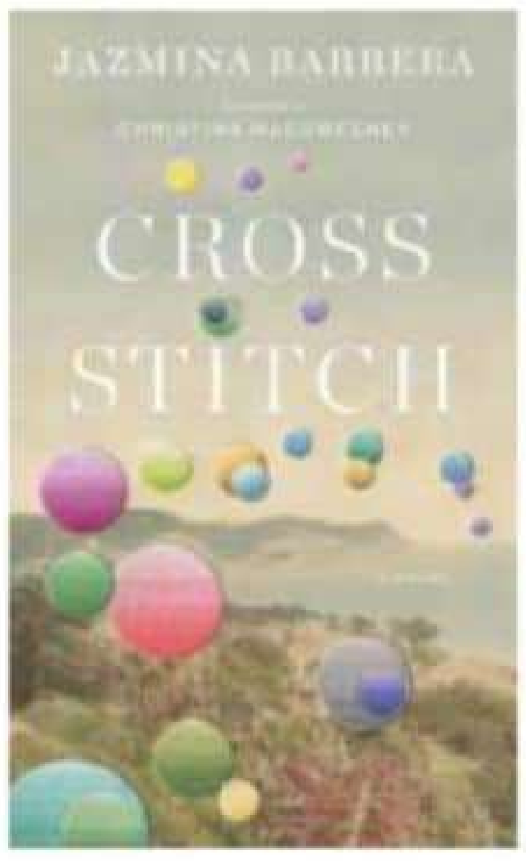
American Zion, *by Benjamin E. Park (Norton).* Park, a historian, traces Mormonism from its inception in New York, in 1830, to its struggle amid persecution in the mid-nineteenth century, to its present status as a global empire of more than seventeen million adherents. He posits that changes in the decade of Mormonism's emergence—such as the vibrant growth of the American marketplace—eliminated élite education as a requirement for divine calling, creating an opportunity for a man like Joseph Smith, Jr., to found the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Throughout, Park delves into Mormon history and lore to produce a picture of the institution as one that is both marginalized and marginalizing.



Unshrinking, *by Kate Manne (Crown).* Fatphobia, as defined by the author of this polemic, a Cornell philosophy professor, is a "set of false beliefs and inflated theories" about fat people which inform both health care and culture at large. Manne's argument draws on personal experiences—she relates having gone on drastic diets and engaging in "dangerous, exploitative" relationships as a teen-ager—and on trenchant analyses of the ways in which fatness has been regarded throughout history. She proposes, for instance, that hatred of fatness is a consequence of racist ideas embedded in American culture in the era of slavery. Manne identifies "beauty and diet culture" as an additional culprit, and argues, "We are wronged bodies, not wrong ones."



Termush, *by Sven Holm, translated from the Danish by Sylvia Clayton (FSG Originals).* This hypnotic novella, written in the nineteen-sixties but appearing only now in the U.S., takes place after a nuclear cataclysm, and is narrated by a man living in a luxury resort that has been converted into a sanctuary for the rich. "We bought the commodity called survival," he dryly notes, but, as the story unfolds and refugees stricken by radiation sickness pour in, the delusional nature of that notion becomes clear. Despite its brevity, the book is richly textured with insights about how money shapes one's conception of safety, and how grasping the interconnectedness of the physical world is also to grasp one's mortality. A resort guest imagines the radiation as light that "streamed out of every object; it shone through robes and skin and the flesh on the bones . . . suddenly to reveal the innermost, vulnerable marrow."



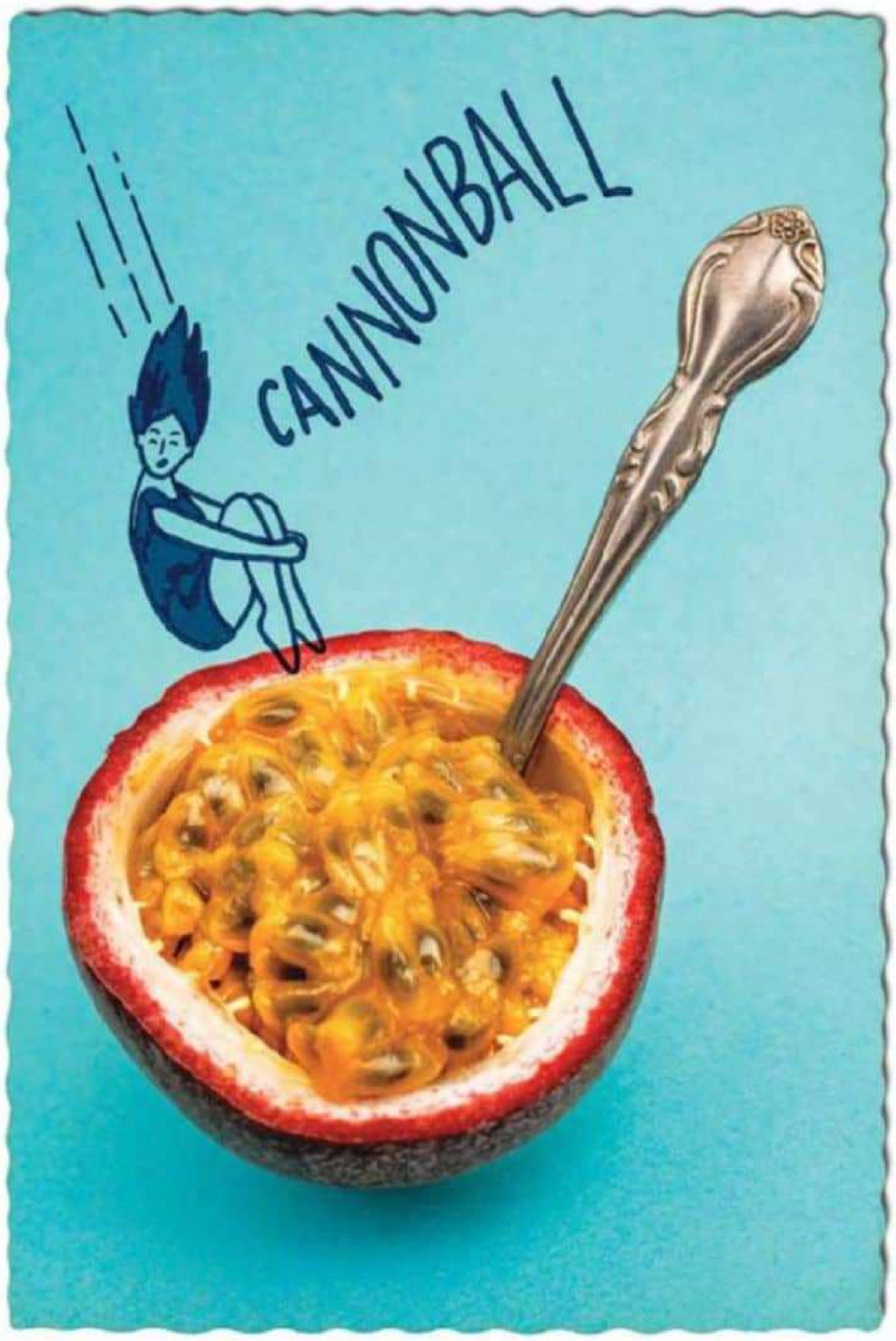
Cross-Stitch, *by Jazmina Barrera, translated from the Spanish by Christina MacSweeney (Two Lines).* The words "text" and "textile" contain a common Latin root, a teacher tells Mila, the narrator of this skillful début novel about female friendship. Mila and Citlali meet as schoolchildren in Mexico City, and bond over a love of embroidery. For Mila, embroidering is both an aesthetic pursuit and an act of political resistance. Years later, Citlali's sudden death leads Mila to reflect on their past, and to remember Citlali asking, "Just what have you done for a world that's falling apart around you? Write?" The novel serves as a response, conjuring Citlali, "like a spell," into life again.

ON AND OFF THE MENU

FRESH DIRECT

A passion-fruit devotee's pilgrimage west.

BY HANNAH GOLDFIELD



About a decade ago, a friend of mine and her husband moved from Brooklyn to Los Angeles. After landing at LAX, they went straight to Gjelina, a restaurant in Venice that exemplifies a certain image of life in Southern California: seasonal, sensual, wood-fired cooking; a sun-dappled patio near the beach. "We had this long, exquisite lunch," she recalled recently. "And just as we were getting ready to pay the bill, feeling like 'Wow, we're Californians now!,' something dropped out of the sky and landed in the middle of the table." A passion fruit had fallen from one of the vines overhead, and as they sat there staring at it in delight a waiter appeared. "Wordlessly," she said, "he cut the fruit into two hemispheres and handed each of us a tiny dessert spoon."

The story sounds like it was plucked out of a tourism campaign, or the depths of my subconscious. I first tried fresh passion fruit fifteen years ago, in Brazil, and in the years since it has captured my appetite and my imagination in equal measure. A passion fruit is as enclosed and mysterious as a hen's egg, though a common commercial variety called Frederick's looks like it was laid by a dragon: when it falls off the vine, its exterior is smooth, firm, and slightly speckled, the deep purple color of wine-stained lips. The shell is stiff and leathery, requiring a bit of sawing to open. What's inside seems almost not meant to be seen: a geometrical, otherworldly cluster of small black seeds (edible, delicate, and pleasingly crunchy), each suspended in an orb of glossy, sunset-colored pulp, surrounded by fragrant juice of the same golden hue, as obscenely slurpable as an oyster. I find the flavor, perhaps my single favorite, intoxicating. It's citrus-adjacent, but more complex: sweet, bright, savory, sour, and even a touch sulfuric. My husband, who loves it less than I do, has likened it to body odor.

After my trip to Brazil, I searched for fresh passion fruit obsessively in New York and rarely found it. When I did, it was often priced prohibitively high, as much as five dollars for a single piece. And then, about a year into the pandemic, I hit upon something enviable while scrolling through Instagram: a video of an influencer with a chicly appointed kitchen, unboxing a shipment of passion fruit. I learned that a company called Rincon Tropics, in California, would mail it across the country, quite affordably, if you were willing to purchase a minimum of five pounds. A few days after I placed my first order, a large U.S.P.S. box arrived, filled to the brim with fragrant purple globes, sturdy enough that they needed minimal cushioning. I piled them in a bowl to wrinkle—the more shrivelled they get, the sweeter—and worked my way through several a day.

A few weeks ago, I shook the hand of the man who grew them. Nick Brown, a slight, bearded thirty-two-year-old who wore a wide-brimmed hat atop a tuft of dark hair, met me at the bottom of a dusty road that led up to his family's ranch in Carpinteria, some seventy miles north of L.A., on a hillside with a glorious ocean view. As we bumped around the six-hundred-acre property in his Subaru, Brown, a sixth-generation farmer, pointed out groves of trees drooping with the weight of unripe avocados and scaly green cherimoya ("like a mango, a pineapple, and a banana all put together," he said), which his father commercialized in the U.S. more than forty years ago.

Passion fruit takes center stage in some of L.A.'s most inventive cooking.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JASON FULFORD AND TAMARA SHOPSIN

Around the same time, the family also planted passion-fruit vines, but found that there was no steady market for their yield. "At times, they couldn't give it away," Brown said. About six years ago, he decided to try again. He had noticed, as I have, a gradual infiltration of passion fruit—a mainstay of Latin American and Asian cuisines, and huge in Hawaii—into the broader American palate. It flavors big-brand seltzer, yogurt, and lip balm; I've seen it on the menu at trendy New York restaurants and in buzzy cookbooks such as "More Than Cake," by the downtown-darling pastry chef Natasha Pickowicz, which includes recipes for jellied passion-fruit candies and passion-fruit olive-oil curd. Pickowicz told me recently that whenever she incorporated it into a menu item at Flora Bar, the Upper East Side restaurant where she worked until it closed, in 2020, "people would go crazy for it," jumping to order the dessert based on that ingredient alone.

The passion fruit was a hit at the Santa Monica farmers' market where Brown had a stand. In 2020, after he stopped driving down because of the pandemic, he began to ship it to a few of his regulars, some of whom happened to be influencers. Brown's Instagram account, where he posts Edenic landscapes and still-lifes of halved fruit, gained a new crowd of admirers.

These days, he ships about a thousand pounds of passion fruit a week—roughly five thousand pieces—directly to consumers, and to restaurants. As we stood beside a thick hedge of vines, growing horizontally, he bent over to pick up fallen fruit, balancing half a dozen pieces in one hand, as if he were about to perform a juggling act. Instead, he carried them to a patio in the center of a sunny stretch of grass, rimmed by succulents and flowering rosemary bushes. "I didn't bring spoons," he said, as he sliced a few fruits open with a serrated knife, "but there's hoses here where we can rinse off." I squeezed half a shell in my palm to loosen the seeds and scraped them out with my teeth, juice running down my chin.

"We can't grow enough," Brown told me—in part because the weather has been unpredictable. Last spring, when he would have expected the vines to flower, ready to be pollinated by bees, a wet fog rolled in and didn't lift for weeks. Once the crop had finally dried out, Brown still had to contend with another issue: deer. "They really love passion-fruit vines, but they're kind of jerks about it," he explained. "I have a video on my phone of a herd just picking off the green, immature passion fruits and eating them like an apple. And then looking up at me, like, 'What are you going to do about it?' "

To follow the scent of passion fruit around L.A. is to discover some of the city's most interesting and quintessentially California cooking. Isla, a new restaurant in Santa Monica, offers a passion-fruit-glazed olive-oil muffin, plus a Tiki-inspired cocktail called an Early Retirement, which is garnished with a flaming passion-fruit shell. At the beloved Los Feliz restaurant Kismet, the chef-owners, Sarah Hymanson and Sara Kramer, serve reduced passion-fruit pulp over a silky chicken-liver mousse, the syrup brightening the liver's creamy richness and tempering its clang of iodine. The Venezuelan-born chef Karla Subero Pittol runs a pop-up called Chainsaw out of her home in Historic Filipinotown, offering, every few weeks, dessert "drops"—a term popularized by streetwear culture which is also, in this case, literal. One evening in December, while "Feliz Navidad" twinkled out of a distant speaker, I stood beneath Subero Pittol's open window, framed by palm trees, as she lowered a basket by rope and pulley. Inside was one of her signature offerings: a passion-fruit-lime icebox pie, capped with frozen whipped cream.

A couple of days later, in the living room of a mid-century house high in the hills of Silver Lake, I sat with the chef Gerardo Gonzalez as he made a passion-fruit aguachile, "my favorite way to use it recently," he said. Gonzalez, who grew up in San Diego, cooked for years in New York, adding an inventive interpretation of Californian-Mexican cuisine to the downtown scene around what's now called Dimes Square, after the restaurant Dimes. About a year ago, Gonzalez returned to his home state. "I sincerely mean it when I say the fruit is why I moved back," he told me, tossing translucent cubes of raw shrimp in passion-fruit pulp and satsuma-mandarin juice.

The satsumas grew on a tree that we could see through the window. Part of the promise of Southern California is the impeccable produce, and that you don't need six hundred acres to grow it yourself. To raise money for a custom surfboard, a nine-year-old I know sold me several pounds of passion fruit foraged from his garden in Echo Park. For some years, Gjusta, a more casual sister establishment to Gjelina, bought passion fruit from a Venice native named Thor Evensen, a self-described "hippie kid," artist, and schoolteacher, who had a backyard vine so productive that he'd approached a few local restaurants, hawking his surplus. "One person grows eight hundred passion fruit and you can't eat those, so you go to your neighbor who has chicken and eggs, and then you trade," he told me, summarizing a podcast about economics that he'd listened to recently. "Or you go to a fancy restaurant and they're, like, 'Oh, seven bucks a pound, no problem.' It's a long and complicated story, but that's kind of how humanity works."

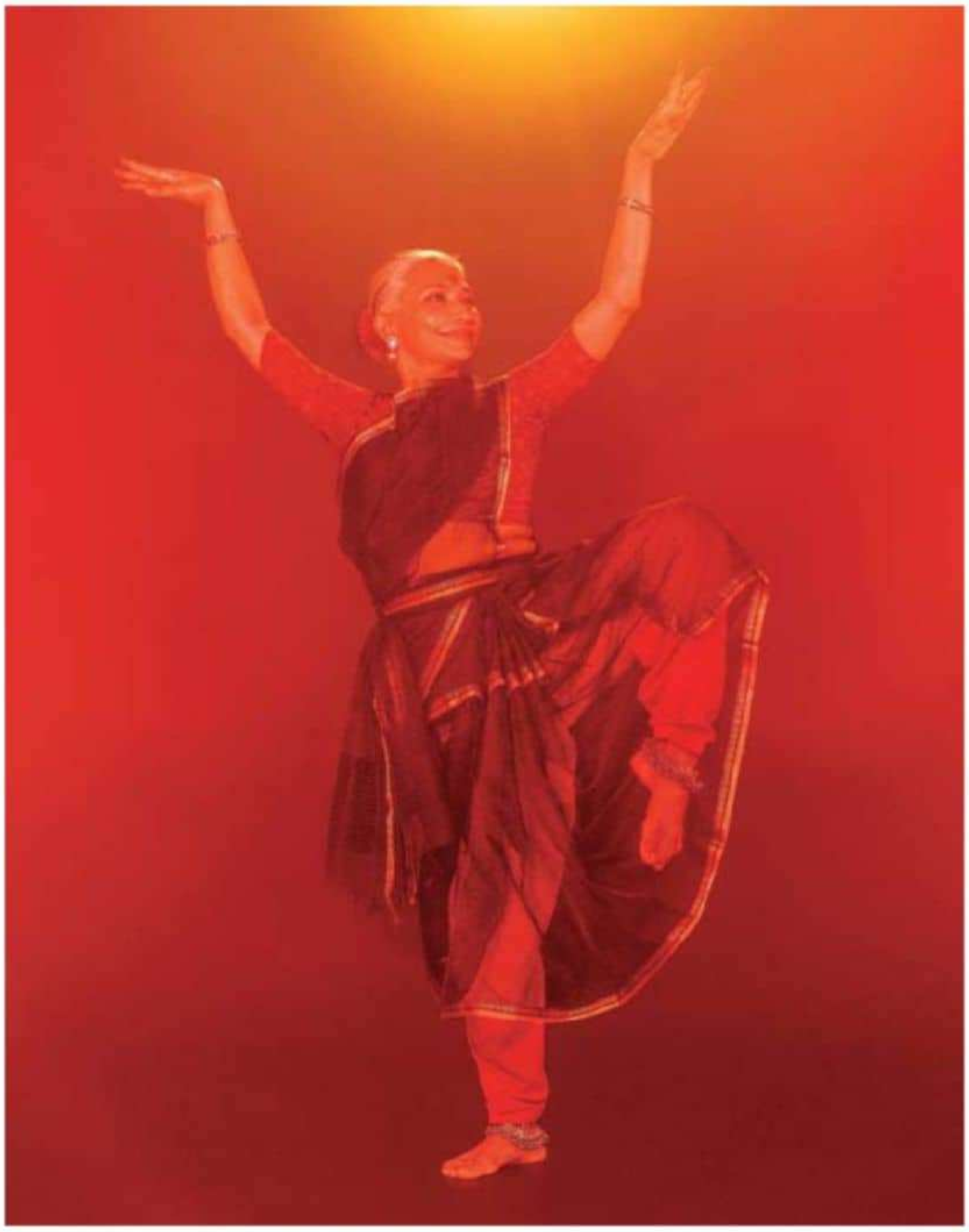
On my last morning in L.A., I returned to Filipinotown, to a café called Doubting Thomas, known for its passion-fruit pie—made with produce from Brown's farm—and ordered a slice to go. On the plane home, as I watched "Once Upon a Time . . . in Hollywood," I opened the small cardboard box to reveal a wedge of vivid custard, as luscious as melted gelato, topped with whipped crème fraîche and a spoonful of seeds. The fruit's familiar bracing tartness was mellowed only slightly with sweetened condensed milk, which was in turn offset by a salty, crisp graham-cracker-macadamia crust. At my feet, in a carry-on bag, sat several pounds of passion fruit, destined for yogurt, smoothies, and the jellies from Natasha Pickowicz's cookbook. Last summer, Pickowicz told me, she planted a vine in her Brooklyn back yard. It flowered, but did not fruit. I will trade her all my chickens and their eggs when it does. ♦

DANCING

BROKEN AND REBUILT

Bijayini Satpathy and a new understanding of Indian classical dance.

BY JENNIFER HOMANS



Trained in the Odissi dance tradition, Satpathy is now exploring other influences.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BALARAMA HELLER

Every artist confronts her past, and, in the case of the Indian dancer Bijayini Satpathy, that past is both a country and a colonial legacy. Satpathy performs Odissi, a dance style from the eastern state of Odisha which is one of India's eight classical dance forms. Although Indian classical dance is commonly assumed to be ancient and reverential—and there is a documented history of devotional dancing extending back more than two millennia—all eight of these designated classical styles are modern, post-colonial inventions.

Even before the British formally departed the country, in 1947, Indian authorities had set out to give their emerging nation its own indigenous theatrical arts, and gurus and dancers from various regions began assembling standardized forms out of a dizzying variety of local practices and traditions. By 1952, four of these freshly codified dance styles—bharatanatyam, kathak, kathakali, and manipuri—had been formally recognized by the government, and given an élite Western stamp, "classical," a word that, as Anurima Banerji points out in her book "Dancing Odissi," had no true equivalent in Indian languages until British rule. Exponents of Odissi pushed for inclusion and exhibited the form at a landmark meeting in New Delhi in 1958, with Nehru himself presiding over a celebratory reception. Odissi gained official recognition two years later and has since been joined by other newly defined forms.

The dances these gurus came up with mostly privileged Hindu traditions and texts, even though, historically, dance across India was shaped by many religious and philosophical contexts. (Odissi, for instance, also has Jain, Buddhist, Muslim, animist, and secular theatrical roots.) Everything was tightly regulated. There were rules for postures, steps, and musical structures; for textual and sculptural sources; for performance, including what order particular pieces should be performed in. The new national dances were also cleaned up, following the lead of purity-minded British social reformers who had stigmatized temple dancers as prostitutes and tried in some cases to ban them. Others tried to strip the dances of overt sexuality—a fool's errand, as one glance at the erotic S-curved body in Odissi proves. Caste played a role, too. In some traditions, such as bharatanatyam, from Tamil Nadu, temple dancers were typically of low caste, but, in the remade, classicized version of the form, bharatanatyam became largely the province of bourgeois Brahmin women. Today, a few lower-caste dancers, such as Nrithya Pillai, are trying to take back their art. Meanwhile, some Hindu nationalists have made moves to link Odissi to their cause, in disregard of Muslim and other historical influences on the art form. In 2018, Narendra Modi's government even nominated the Odissi dancer Sonal Mansingh to the parliament.

Satpathy, who is fifty, is no stranger to the ironies of her art. She began dancing as a child and later studied in the style of Kelucharan Mohapatra, one of the male gurus who codified Odissi, in the fifties. Among the techniques she absorbed was the virtuosic "gotipua" style, which emerged during the Mughal Empire and was traditionally danced by young boys cross-dressing to perform female roles. In 1993, she joined Nrityagram, a female troupe based in Bangalore. At Nrityagram, which means "dance village" in Sanskrit, dancers and students live, breathe, eat, and sleep Odissi in ways that recall the immersion of past devotional and temple practices, except that here the devotion is aesthetic, not religious. (Satpathy is agnostic.) In a further spirit of independence, Nrityagram avoids having male gurus; instead, the women are their own collective guru, and, over the years, their art has drawn on a variety of sources outside of those prescribed by the official Odissi form.

Satpathy herself has never been orthodox in her approach. As the director of education and a lead performer at Nrityagram, she supplemented established Odissi exercises with yoga, martial arts, ballet, Pilates, and jogging, and even made up her own exercises to stretch the capacities of her dancers and the limits of her art. A day with Satpathy might begin with a run and then move to Odissi's codified isolations of the eyes, neck, torso, palms, fingers, ankles, toes, heels—each body part moving alone and in opposition to other body parts. (There are dozens of exercises for the eyes alone.) She also worked closely with Nrityagram's artistic director, Surupa Sen, to bring a variety of ancient texts to bear on new dances. Yet, for all the innovations Nrityagram introduced, the troupe's performances maintained a traditional Odissi look and feel, and in 2018, after twenty-five years, Satpathy left this village home to choreograph and perform her own dances.

Satpathy's much anticipated first piece of solo choreography, "ABHIPSAA—a seeking" (*abhipsaa* is Sanskrit for "seeking"), was delayed by the pandemic, but finally had its New York première at the Baryshnikov Arts Center, where I saw it this fall. It will go on tour to various U.S. cities in the spring. (Full disclosure: Satpathy and Banerji have been in residence at N.Y.U.'s Center for Ballet and the Arts, which I founded and direct.) The work is made up of four dances, with original compositions by a team of musicians, including the extraordinary singer and composer Bindhumalini Narayanaswamy, who is trained in both Hindustani and Carnatic music. The four dances unfold with a clear trajectory, moving from youth to death, from form to formlessness. The first is a narrative dance inspired by an ode attributed to the eighth-century philosopher and poet Shri Adi Shankaracharaya, which Satpathy interprets as being about the "oneness" of male and female sexual organs and the presence in a young girl's body of both masculine and feminine, human and divine. We continue with two movements that reveal the "seeking" of the title ("Vibhanga—broken and rebuilt" and "Virahi—in longing") and conclude with "Vimukthi—the final dance."

The performance begins in semidarkness, and we see Satpathy planted in a deep lunge, low to the floor, hands and arms undulating, as if searching the air around her. Bindhumalini's aching, chantlike voice seems to move through jagged halftones in veering exploration of rhythm and tone. Satpathy is calm and clad in Odissi dress—elegant silks in deep mauve and bright blue, with wrist and ankle bracelets, hair pinned back, heavy makeup, and a large red bindi on her forehead. She deepens the lunge and eventually moves into a standard Odissi position, on one leg, the spine curved in that distinctive erotic S shape. She's been standing here for decades and her body seems totally resolved, but—and this is where her seeking takes her—she doesn't stay. Even when Satpathy is rooted, something in her body—arms, fingers, back, shoulders, neck, eyes, eyebrows—is always moving. When she turns and stands to show us her back, for example, her stillness is disrupted by waves of movement travelling up, down, sideways, through muscle and bone.

I kept trying to pinpoint the motor or source of her movement, which seems to come from everywhere at once, and to circulate through her body like blood. Her abdominal core—a common motor in dance—is hidden in folds of fabric and in the extreme Odissi arch of the spine, which throws her pelvis back and chest forward. She later told me that the motor is the foot. Not the muscles but the way the foot hits the ground, which sends energy up through the body and out through the head, limbs, and eyes. This is physical but also a matter of mind—the movement ends only when the intention driving it has exited the eyes and reaches us. The journey can be slow or fast, even instantaneous: this constant cycling of energy through the body is why her movement never appears static or doll-like, as Odissi can. Her lyricism even has a familiar Western modern-dance flow, which seems surprisingly natural in her Odissi body.

There are Hindu stories in these dances, but they are hard to follow unless you are versed in the meanings assigned to each pose. Dancers memorize these meanings in their training, but part of what Satpathy is up to, I think, is abstracting feelings of jealousy and love so that we feel them without any narrative or religious grounding. It is enough to watch her body and being slide between male and female, object and subject, to become fully absorbed in the dance. Ruptures in tradition and additions to it are interwoven, as if form were not set or rule-bound but malleable and absorptive. The second dance in "ABHIPSAA," for example, uses a Carnatic musical genre, the thillana, that is common in bharatanatyam but not in Odissi. Moving to it, she breaks further from Odissi's formal poses: a hand loses its shape and falls to the floor; a Pilates-style reclining position is held insistently long.

The final dance is based on a poem by the medieval North Indian mystic Kabir about death freeing the soul from the confines of life. It is another quiet Satpathy acknowledgment of the varied non-Hindu sources of her art. We don't know much about Kabir's life, but we do know that there is a lot of Islamic thought in Kabir's work and a lot of Kabir's thought in Islamic writings. His poems, claimed by Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs alike, turn a pointed wit on worldly hierarchies of caste, gender, and religion. They belong to an oral and sung tradition that, like dance, is passed on by those who perform them, from Kabir's day to ours.

In this spirit, Satpathy's dance takes full flight, spiralling along Odissi curves and diagonals of space, body, and time, until, in a sharp movement, she breaks the fourth wall and we find her momentarily flung before us, arms and eyes open, as if to say, "Here I am!" She is pulled back into her dance, only to be thrown forward again, this time on her knees, as the music ends and the lights go out. She has arrived at the liberation that death brings—and also, perhaps, at her newly conceived Odissi life.

The ending, I venture, is also political. Under cover of a felt devotion, Satpathy has given the final gesture in this performance of an invented classical Hindu form to a poet whose work cannot be separated from Islam. ♦

MUSICAL EVENTS

MIND IN FLUX

The viscerally complex music of George Lewis.

BY ALEX ROSS

Lewis prizes collaboration, improvisation, and cultural cross-pollination.

George Lewis is one of the most formidable figures in modern music: a composer of international renown, a legendary improvising trombonist, a computer-music pioneer, a professor at Columbia, a stalwart of the Black avant-garde collective known as the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. Yet a routine encomium to Lewis's achievements and influence would ignore the import of his scholarly writings, which resist the usual narratives of individual genius. His 2008 book, "A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music," is a riveting portrait of communal originality, with the author assuming a background role. Let's simply say, then, that this genially authoritative figure deserves an extended round of applause. At the age of seventy-one, he is at the height of his productivity; he had seven premières in 2023, in New York, Vienna, and points in between. In a December concert at the Park Avenue Armory, the International Contemporary Ensemble, of which Lewis is the artistic director, played his music on a double bill with a performance by the composer-pianist Amina Claudine Myers, another A.A.C.M. veteran. The ensemble has also recorded "Afterword," Lewis's first opera. His second, "Comet/Poppea," arrives in June, in Los Angeles.

Lewis grew up in Chicago, the son of Southerners who had come North as part of the Great Migration. As a third grader at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, he took up the trombone, which, he later wrote, appealed to him as "big, shiny, and weird." He went on to Yale, where he studied music theory and majored in philosophy. On a break from college, he joined the A.A.C.M., which had formed on the South Side of Chicago in 1965, with Muhal Richard Abrams, Anthony Braxton, Joseph Jarman, Roscoe Mitchell, Wadada Leo Smith, and Henry Threadgill among its early members. Their music combined African American traditions with insights gleaned from classical modernism and various world cultures. The A.A.C.M. tended to be categorized as avant-garde jazz, although, as Lewis's scholarship has shown, it should have been incorporated into a canon of experimental composition that has a long history of shutting out Black artists.

The trombone was the vehicle of Lewis's initial breakthrough. His astonishing technique ran the gamut from delicate filigree to unearthly howling. In 1977, Whitney Balliett, this magazine's longtime jazz critic, reported that at one A.A.C.M. event Lewis had unleashed "four consecutive—almost overlapping—ascending arpeggios played in sixty-fourth notes and in different keys," and that a little later he had "mumbled funny gibberish through his instrument." The A.A.C.M.'s experimentalism often had a streak of the carnivalesque. Myers, in her set at the Armory, maintained that tradition with an uproarious piece titled "Stay in the Light," in which she and her collaborators—the bassist Jerome Harris, the drummer Reggie Nicholson, and the vocalist and dramatist Richarda Abrams—enacted a mini-opera at once satirizing and celebrating the search for spiritual enlightenment.

In 1982, Lewis moved to Paris to work at IRCAM, Pierre Boulez's lavishly funded electronic-music studio. Defying a prevalent high-modernist mentality, Lewis programmed Apple computers to react to live sonic input and deliver improvisatory responses. ("Rainbow Family," his major project at IRCAM, can be heard on Carrier Records; the saxophonist Steve Lacy, the multi-instrumentalist Douglas Ewart, the guitarist Derek Bailey, and the bassist Joëlle Léandre took part.) Lewis later introduced an interactive human-and-machine software platform called Voyager. He has

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ILLUSTRATION BY BEN PEARCE

therefore had long experience contemplating the philosophical issues around artificial intelligence. His conclusion is that the behavior of the machine depends heavily on who is programming it. In an essay about Voyager, he argues that his system enacts the density and multiplicity that have long characterized Afro-diasporic music-making.

In the nineties, Lewis took up his first major academic post, at the University of California, San Diego. He soon gathered admirers in the contemporary-classical field, not least because of the force of his intellect. So many heady ideas proliferate in his pieces—titles such as "Tractatus," "Mnemosis," and "Signifying Riffs" give the flavor—that one can overlook their visceral appeal. Granted, Lewis is by no means an easy-listening composer: his episodes of controlled chaos can rival the stormiest creations of the European avant-garde. But his acute ear for instrumental timbre means that the textures never devolve into murk. One signature device is to pit shrill, birdlike cries in the upper winds against sustained, heaving sonorities in the bass. You hear this oceanic, almost Wagnerian effect in Lewis's large-scale orchestral work "Minds in Flux," which had its première at the Proms, in London, in 2021. (American orchestras should take it up.) At the same time, he hasn't lost the impish wit of his youthful outings.

The two scores that Lewis presented at the Armory embodied a dialectic of complexity and play. First, the International Contemporary Ensemble, under the direction of Rebekah Heller, lit into the 2013 piece "Assemblage," whose title alludes both to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *agencement*—"contingency, heterogeneity, nonlinearity, and emergence," in Lewis's paraphrase—and to the artistic practice of reworking junk objects. At the beginning, eruptive full-ensemble gestures give way to a gently purring harp figure and to snappy rhythms on agogô bells. These incipient grooves are almost immediately waylaid by fresh alarms and excursions. The ensemble had no trouble adopting Lewis's turn-on-a-dime energy, conveying a kind of happy exhaustion at the end.

"Blombos Workshop," for solo piano, written in 2020, is inspired by a seventy-three-thousand-year-old abstract design found in the Blombos Cave, in South Africa. The piece seems to conjure a prehistoric avant-garde musical workshop, a sonic analogue of the visual culture that can be glimpsed in the cave. Fully notated passages—scampering runs, precisely hammering chords, ghostly arpeggios—are interspersed with opportunities for improvisation. The first twenty-four bars indicate rhythms, dynamics, and registers but not precise pitches. The ending, too, is left open. Cory Smythe, himself a composer and improviser of note, proved an ideal conduit, making the distinction between Lewis's ideas and his own elaborations inconsequential.

"Afterword," which had its première in 2015, is in some ways Lewis's most conventional score to date. It is an opera in eleven scenes, fully notated. The libretto, however, is thoroughly unorthodox. It tells the story of the formation of the A.A.C.M., mining material that Lewis gathered for "A Power Stronger Than Itself." The composer has, in other words, made an operatic adaptation of the scholarly history that he wrote about the collective to which he belongs. We've come a long way from the Florentine Camerata—yet not immeasurably far, since several founders of the opera genre mythologized themselves as Orpheus, the original composer. In "Afterword," new myths are afoot. The libretto tends not to specify individuals, instead assembling a collage of overlapping voices. As in the book, the focus is on the collective workings of a community. "Heroes, gods, and masters do not exist in our sight" is one crucial line.

The opera's musical idiom has its own contrarian magic. Lewis adopts a fairly severe non-tonal language, with angular vocal lines piercing thickets of dissonance. Some listeners have found the result disconcerting: people raised on the South Side seem to have been possessed by the spirit of Arnold Schoenberg. To my ears, it's a productive defamiliarization effect, banishing stereotypes and signalling cross-cultural influences. (Threadgill, in his recent memoir, "Easily Slip Into Another World," written with Brent Hayes Edwards, recounts being dumbstruck by his first encounter with Schoenberg's "Pierrot Lunaire.") There's also an arcane comedy at work. In a scene depicting the A.A.C.M.'s inaugural meeting, which included a strenuous debate about the nature of originality, one voice sings, "Do people even know what original music is? I don't." In response, we hear the instrumental equivalent of a wry smile: low cello tremolo, some light taps on cymbals and tam-tam, a quizzical piano arpeggio. Let's start with that. ♦

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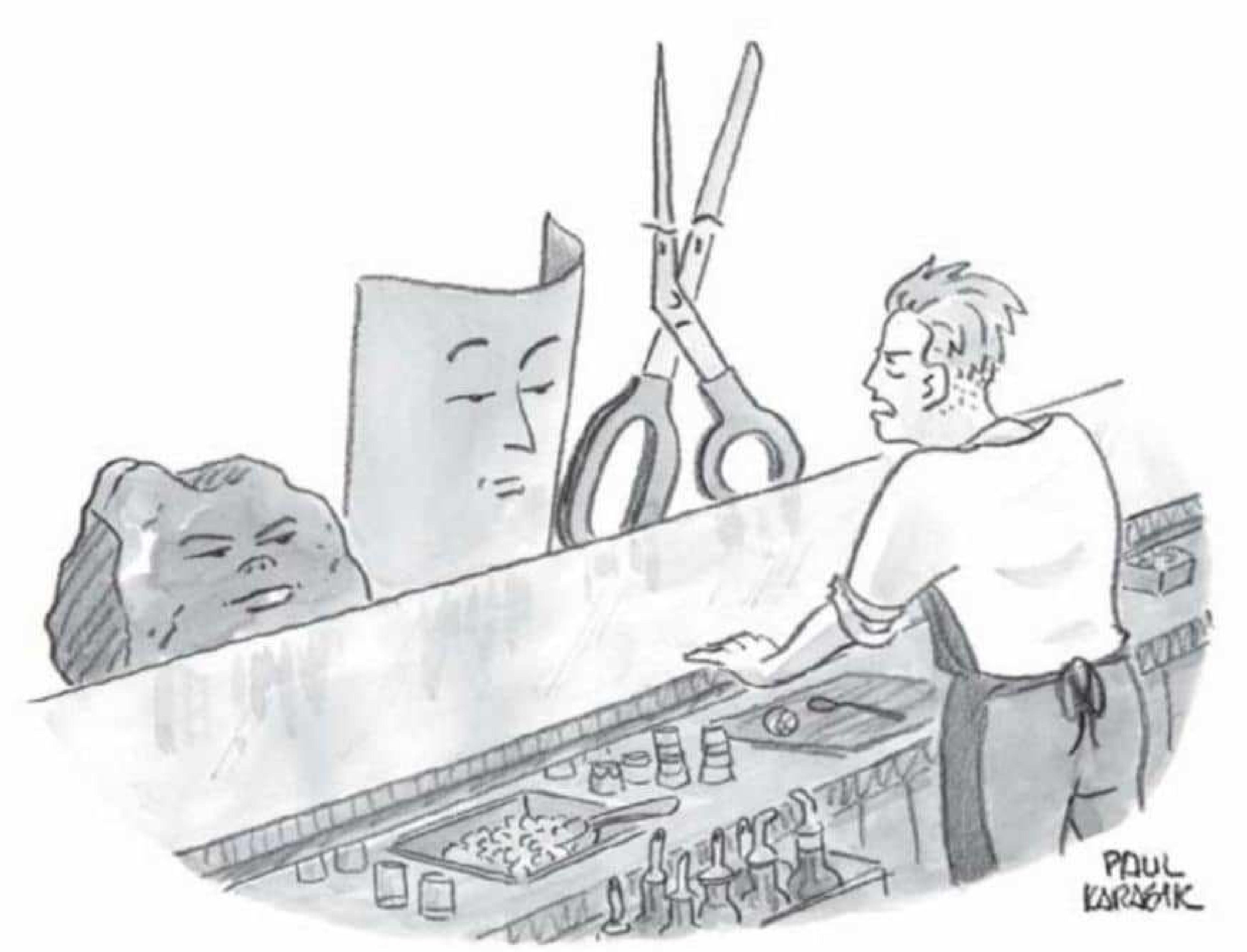
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Paul Karasik, must be received by Sunday, January 14th. The finalists in the December 18th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the January 29th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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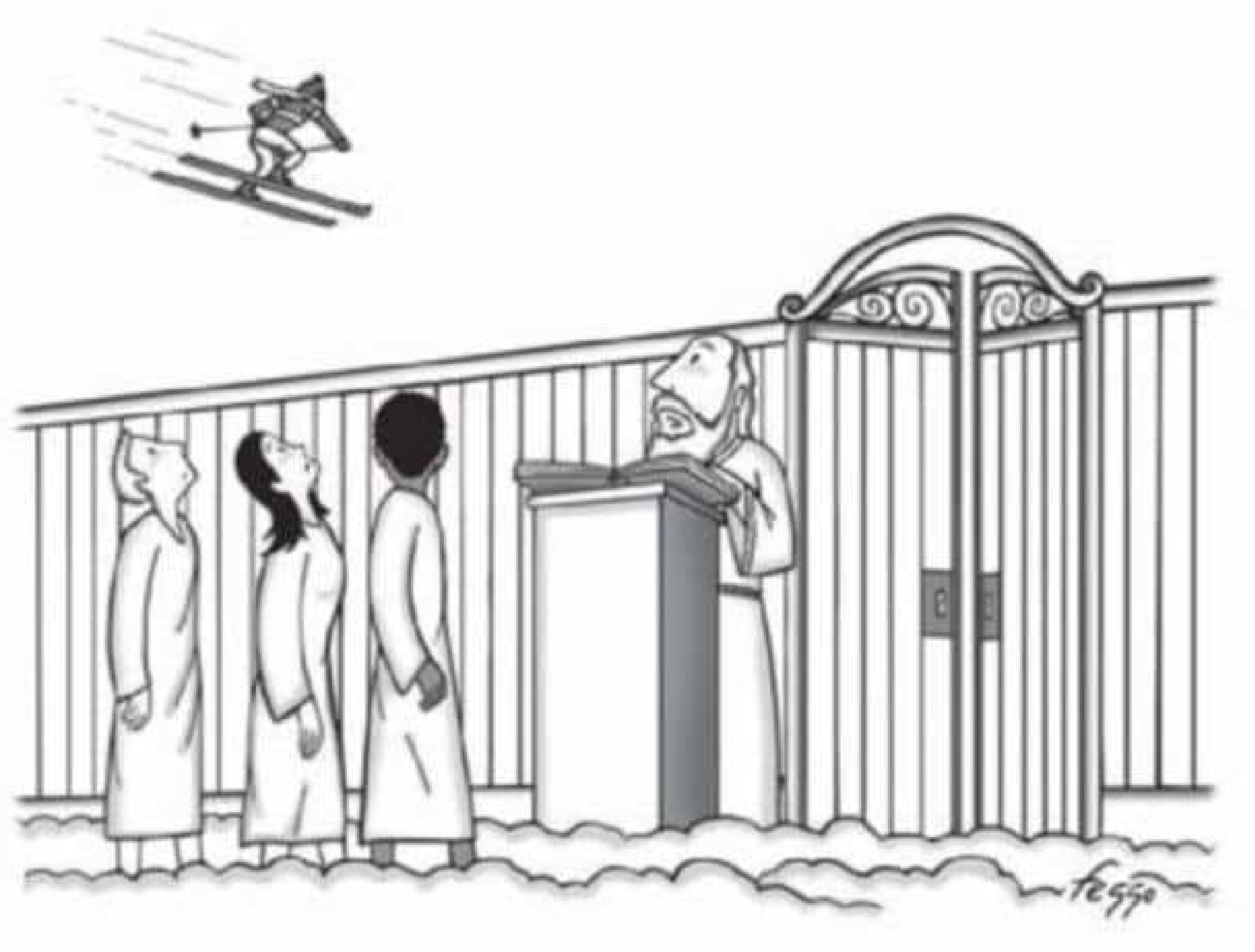
THE FINALISTS

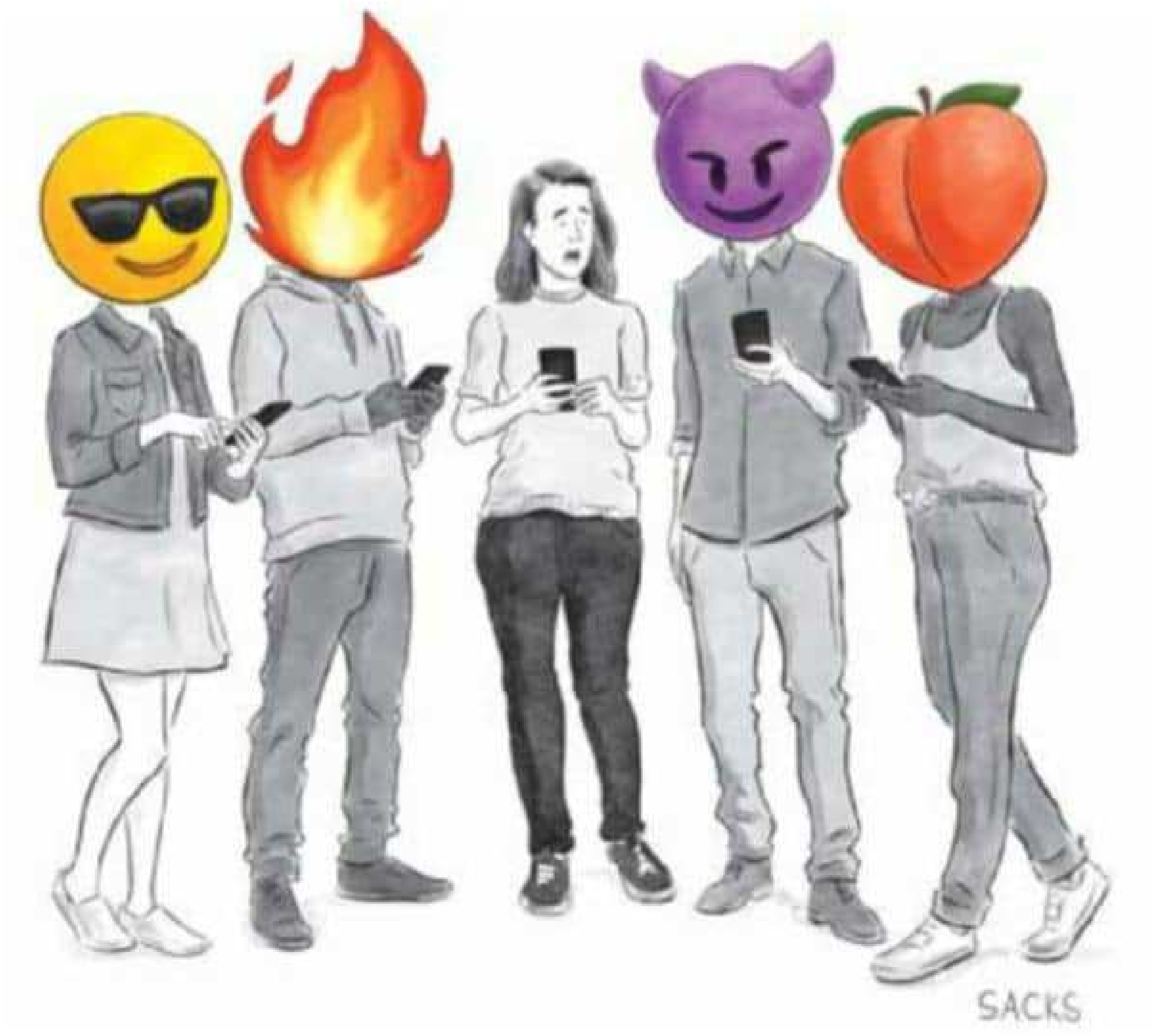


“John 3:16 still the time to beat!”
Douglas Finkelstein, Redondo Beach, Calif.

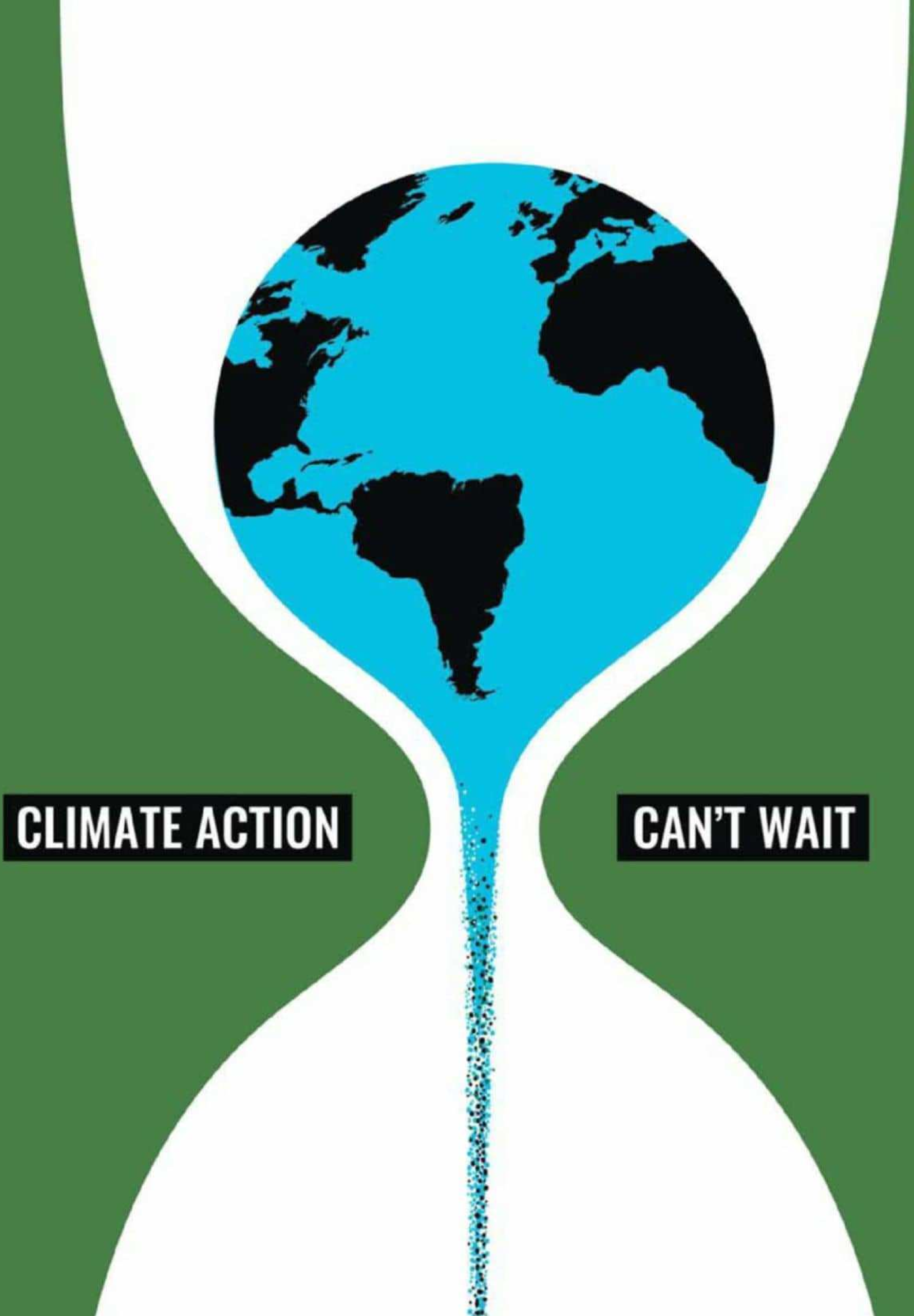
“Yeah, I know. His dad owns the place.”
Rick Nymeyer, Palm Harbor, Fla.

“Looks like good form, but who am I to judge?”
Robby Tucker, Alexandria, Va.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“Oh, no! The four emojis of the apocalypse!”
Naum Milyavskiy, Los Angeles, Calif.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CAN'T WAIT

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PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

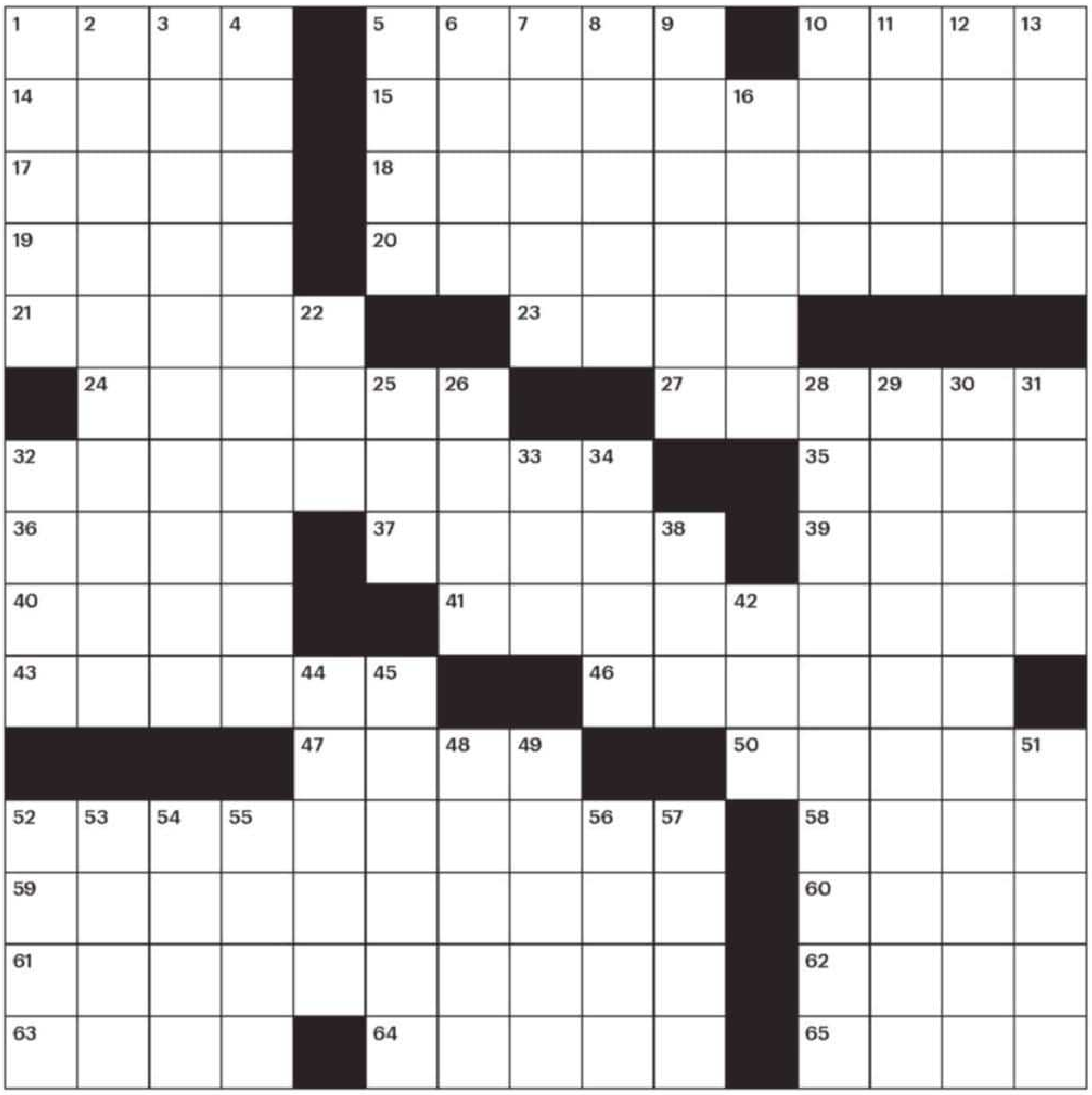
THE CROSSWORD

A moderately challenging puzzle.

BY ANNA SHECHTMAN

ACROSS

1 Tao, literally
5 "La ___ et la Bête"
10 Contraction with two apostrophes
14 Arm of the Dept. of Labor
15 When Pablo Picasso painted "The Old Guitarist" and "La Vie"
17 Editor's override
18 It's built up during a workout
19 Proverbial doorstop
20 What might cause someone to snap?
21 Mortimer ___ (ventriloquist's dummy of old TV)
23 Recognized
24 "Two Concepts of Liberty" lecturer Berlin
27 Like icebox cakes
32 Those on the tenure track, for short
35 Peters who won an Emmy for "Mare of Easttown"
36 Cupful from a street vender in Kolkata
37 Nonbinary pronoun
39 Creator of a surreal dream sequence in Hitchcock's "Spellbound"
40 Queens's ___ Park
41 Made more than
43 Paradisiacal
46 Slides (over)
47 Wear confidently
50 2017 title role for Hugh Jackman
52 Diego Velázquez painting in which "representation undertakes to represent itself," per Michel Foucault
58 Opposite of *bueno*
59 Edith Wharton character who is described as a "ruin of a man" after surviving a crash
60 Fool, to a Brit
61 Part of a company
62 Chances
63 "So do I"
64 Count in music
65 Moola in Cholula



DOWN

1 Jobs
2 Floored
3 1982 track that topped *Rolling Stone's* "100 Greatest Hip-Hop Songs of All Time" list
4 Negativity fuelled by jealousy, as popularized by Mary J. Blige
5 Some cosmetic augmentations, for short
6 Airline that only offers kosher meals
7 "American Graffiti" director George
8 Words of assistance
9 Item stocked in an infirmary
10 "Dies ___" (Latin hymn)
11 Ref. book
12 ___ dire (jury-selection process)
13 Countercurrent
16 Cheap, in adspeak
22 Sink temporarily
25 "The only serious thing in the world," according to Oscar Wilde
26 Relative of a Swiss Roll
28 Lo-fi genre that boomed during the COVID-19 lockdowns
29 Pushing the envelope
30 Some Parmesan-topped courses
31 Tennyson's "Geraint and ___"
32 Land unit
33 Blaze, to Blaise
34 Parks it
38 ___ center
42 I.S.P. featured in "You've Got Mail"
44 Dunne of "The Awful Truth"
45 Informal discussion
48 About
49 Detangler targets
51 "Au contraire!"
52 Lower
53 Encouraging start?
54 Ersatz
55 Conjurer
56 "*C'est ___ que tu parles?*" (De Niro-inspired line in "La Haine")
57 Dried out

Solution to the previous puzzle:

S	O	S	A	D	■	■	P	O	P	P	E	D	I	N
U	N	T	I	E	S	■	A	L	O	O	G	O	B	I
S	I	R	R	A	H	■	W	E	B	N	O	V	E	L
H	O	E	■	F	A	R	■	S	O	C	I	E	T	E
I	N	G	A	■	M	A	C	■	D	E	S	■	■	■
■	B	A	D	M	E	M	O	R	Y	■	T	A	T	E
M	A	N	D	O	L	I	N	E	S	■	S	L	U	G
A	G	O	■	M	E	N	S	A	N	S	■	M	L	A
P	E	N	A	■	S	T	U	D	E	N	T	A	I	D
S	L	A	G	■	S	O	L	A	R	L	A	M	P	■
■	■	■	A	P	P	■	S	P	F	■	B	A	M	A
F	A	C	I	A	L	S	■	T	E	D	■	T	A	N
I	R	O	N	R	U	L	E	■	C	E	M	E	N	T
N	O	R	S	E	G	O	D	■	T	S	U	R	I	S
D	N	A	T	E	S	T	S	■	■	I	D	S	A	Y

Find more puzzles and this week's solution at
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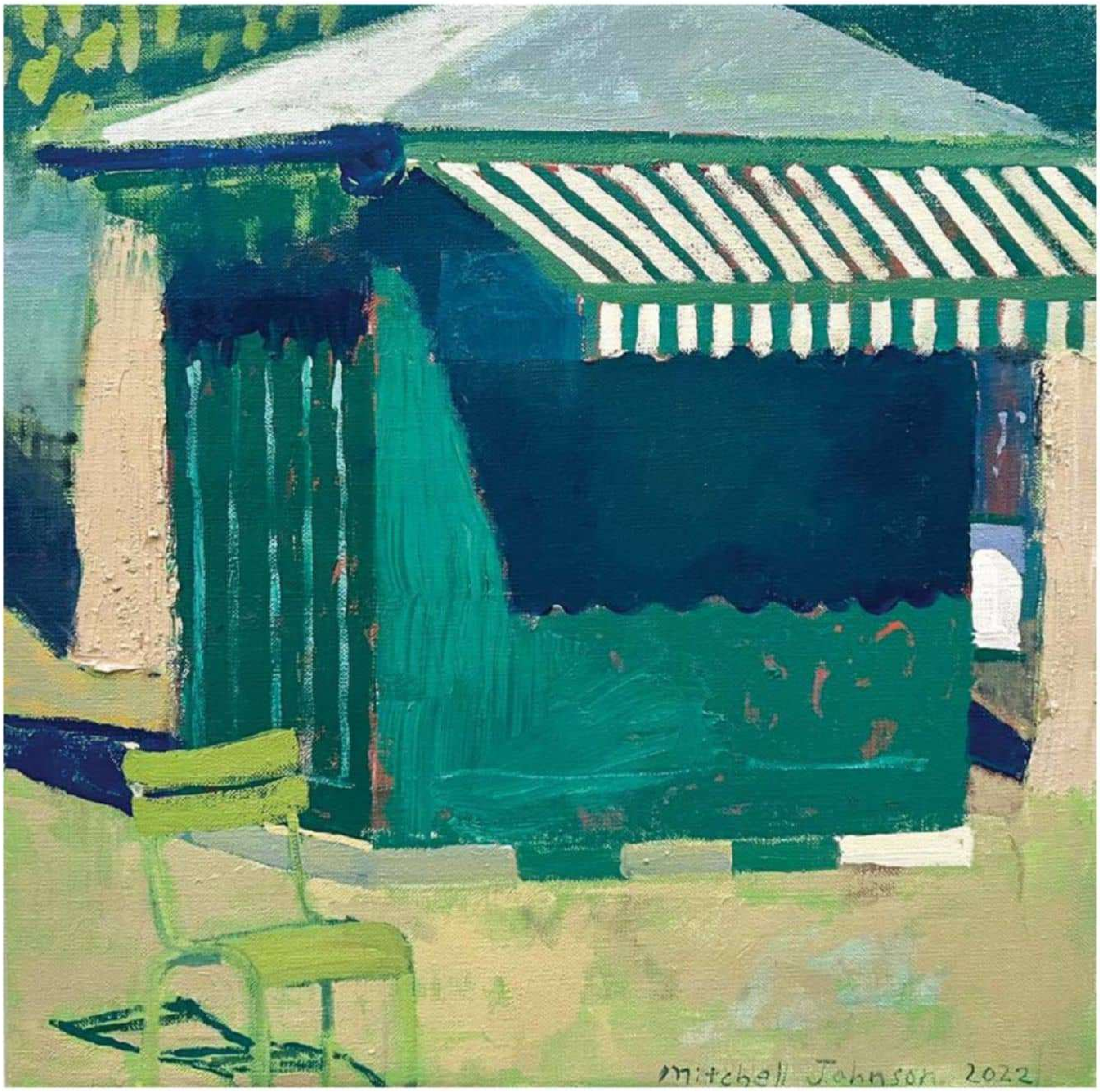

Luxembourg, 2022, 16 x 16 inches, oil on canvas. © 2023 Mitchell Johnson.

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